Tread Softly

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Tread Softly

by HigherMagic

Summary

Father's voice filled his lodgings, and Will sighed, closing the door behind him and resting against it, eyes closed. He needed a moment, just to breathe and remain still.

"War. Violence. Murder. All of it, gone. At the steep cost of the highs, we have rid humanity of these dangerous, evil lows. There is no suffering. There is no madness. All that exists is a perfect world. A utopia. We did it, citizens of Libria. Without the burden of feeling, we are free to live."

Notes

So, for those of you who haven't seen the movie, Equilibrium is a movie starring Christian Bale set in a dystopian society where the entire population takes a drug that suppresses all emotions. Will's character is part of an order of Clerics who are set to find people who stop taking their doses, and art/things that conjure emotion, and destroy them.

It's a fantastic movie for religious/color metaphors, and one of my favorites. A lot of this fic follows the plot of the movie with some pretty heavy divergence, however, since the Hannibal character actually dies in the movie, but obviously doesn't in this fic.

I will say, because baby me didn't know any better, there's a pretty powerful streak of ableism and ace/arophobia in the original narrative that quickly becomes apparent when one tries to write a fic based on it. In my head, Will is best classed as demisexual towards the end, but I'd like to apologize in advance because I tried my best not to give a gross "having emotions means wanting sex" vibe. As an aroace myself, I definitely don't want to give the impression that this is something I agree with.

I hope you guys like it! It caused me a lot of grief to write this, and I know I will never do a straight up movie adaptation ever again, but it was a fun experiment :D Enjoy!

Chapter 1

Bodies lay strewn in the aftermath of the raid. Chunks of plaster had been taken from the crumbling walls in the wake of buckshot and bullets, blood arcing in splatters of red, both drying and new, fresh-dripping. Will walked among them, untouched, a pistol gripped in each hand, their expanded magazines filled with bullets weighing him down. He was stone, impassive. Dust touched his tongue and his lips, settled in his hair and on his shoulders, but he paid it no mind.

A shadow passed by him and overtook; his partner, the man's eyes sharp and intent on the ground and bodies beneath their feet. Watching for any twitch of life, any held-in breath that hinted the offenders were playing dead. Nothing, just the flutter of their passing stirring the pages of an open book, clutched in a dead man's hands.

Will followed Hobbs through the corridor of the abandoned skyscraper, one of many that now made up the landscape of the Outlands, his breaths as even as his steps. They joined up with the captain, a black-helmeted man same as all the rest, and came upon a door that had been barred and sealed. "Sense offenders inside, Cleric," the captain told him. His voice was even, too. "We don't know how many there are."

A twitch marked Will's amusement. At his shoulder, Hobbs shifted his weight and breathed out. "Break it down," Will commanded. "And blow the bulbs."

"Yes, Cleric," the captain said, and gathered his men on either side of the door. They planted fuses at the hinges, and one man had his gun aimed at the light above Will's head in the corridor, ready to blind them all.

Will gripped his pistols, and began to run. Long, even strides brought him close to the door, and he jumped for it as the fuses blew, and the lights went out. The door buckled under his weight and screeched along the floor as he bowed his head, dodging the flurry of bullets that were aimed for a man's chest height, but missed him in his defensive crouch.

The light was shot out, and the room fell into darkness. Will closed his eyes, and remained steady, slowly pushing himself to his feet. Noiseless. He was a ghost, a silent watcher; the same as Death upon his pale steed.

"Where is he?" a voice whispered. Frantic. Will could practically hear their rushing hearts.

"Shut up!" another replied.

A scuff of boots across gravel-laden ground. One of the neighboring rooms had been shot out in the purge. There was debris, kicked by nervous wayward feet. "Did anyone hit him?"

"Is he dead?"

Another twitch, a flicker of contemplative anticipation, as one might count down the minutes to the sunrise so that they could begin their day. Will straightened up, and took his stance.

The building was a grid of ten-by-tens, with large meeting rooms on either side, and Will had entered one such room. Thirty feet by thirty feet, with stone pillars every ten to hold up the ceiling. Two would have taken place behind the pillars, the rest out in even degrees, wary of clustering together as if Clerics had some kind of heat-sense that alerted them when there were enemies nearby.

Will needed no such help.

He reached out to either side of him, guns raised to shoulder height, which would accommodate most men – necks, shoulders, or chests, this height stood the greatest chance of hitting something important. He shot. The flare of his pistols as the bullets left confirmed what he needed to know, and he twisted, and shot to his sides again, hitting the next men, stationed at the statistically most likely positions.

Another straightening move, the men around him screaming in fear. Easy. Predictable. Sixteen degrees forward for each arm. He fired again and two more men fell. And again, another sixteen degrees. One in front of him, one ducked behind. Classic, ill-trained.

One of them managed to fire, and Will stepped back so that his bullets ended up in the chest of his compatriot, felling him. Will aimed behind him, the last shot fired close enough to his ear to make it ring. He didn't flinch.

He lowered his weapons, the muzzles of them glowing from the heat of so many shots fired, and breathed out. "Clear!"

The captain and his helmets came in, flashlights attached to their guns to see that, indeed, Will had slaughtered them all. Hobbs was there as Will left, and they went to search the rest of the building as the helmets swept the ground floor.

The walls were barren, plain cement, and Will paid them no mind as he passed over the slew of bodies. It seemed there were more and more of them with each raid, clustering together like terrified mice as the cat prowled by and sniffed out their nests.

He paused midstride, head turning towards one of the smaller rooms. There was a carpet in the middle of it, a vaguely floral pattern on it, through the golden-colored thing was threadbare and well-trodden so badly that the flowers appeared faded. He entered the room, Hobbs at his side, and pressed his lips together.

"It's here," he said.

"Where?" Hobbs replied, searching for a trap door, or some clue in the walls.

Will nodded to the carpet. "There." He stepped forward and pulled back the carpet, revealing a plain wooden floor, but there were unmistakable breaks where the furrows of the hardwood lining seemed a little more pronounced. "Captain!" he called, and soon two helmets came forward with crowbars, lifting up a jigsaw puzzle piece of the floor to reveal a store of contraband beneath.

Will tilted his head, and waited for the examiner to come forward. Two helmets lifted the topmost painting, depicting a woman sitting in pose, a small smile tilting her mouth in a way Will didn't quite understand. She had the air of a sense offender about her, a shine in her eyes that was unlike the rest of the population, a strange mirth to her smile.

The examiner scanned the painting, and turned to him. "It's real," he confirmed.

Will nodded. "Burn it all."

He turned away and left the building as more helmets came in with flamethrowers, lighting up the art. Hobbs was his shadow again, exiting the building with him. The Clerics' jobs were done; they came in to subdue the offenders, while the helmets cleaned the place out.

Will waited, reloading his magazines. He looked over to Hobbs, catching him eyeing the growing plumes of smoke clouds as they ascended from the shot-out windows. His eyes fell, to a book sticking out of his partner's pocket – the same one that had been clutched in the hands of one of the foremost bodies in the raid. His head tilted.

"Why didn't you let contraband control take that?" he asked evenly. Everything was even these days. Hobbs turned to him, and put a hand over the book as though to hide it. Will's brows creased down in a frown, but then the concerning emotion was gone. Hobbs took the book out. It was a book of poetry, and he huffed.

"They miss things, sometimes," he said, opening it and thumbing through it like it didn't intrigue him in the slightest. That was good – Will didn't particularly like Hobbs. No one liked anyone, that was the point, but he was a skilled Cleric and a good partner and Will didn't want to report him for a misunderstanding. "I'd like to take it to evidence and log it myself."

Will nodded, accepting that. "Shall we?" Hobbs nodded, and they got in the car together, driving away as the building and all the contraband within it went up in flames.

They approached the steep concrete walls of Libria, the new city that was founded by Father after the Third World War. Father's voice echoed over the speaker system, constantly on a loop, as they provided their identification and were allowed inside. Will drove Hobbs to the contraband containment facility, so he could go in and log the book.

"Will," Hobbs said, and Will looked at him, the car idling. "We keep burning all this…" He waved vaguely, and gestured to the book in his lap. "Piece by piece. Why not just burn the whole Outlands and be done with it?

Will hummed. "Resources are tight," he replied. "An uncontrolled fire could spread to the city."

"Yes, I suppose," Hobbs agreed, and set his gaze forward again. Will looked with him, eyeing one of the giant blimps floating above the city with Father's face on it, reciting his new doctrine.

"Every time we go out there, and come back, it hits me how far we've come," Will murmured. He wasn't old enough to remember the war itself, or feel the heel of it crushing the population, but his parents had been. He remembered when the great city of Libria opened to the populace, and Prozium became readily available. Remembered the first time his father had given it to him, and he'd felt at peace.

"It does?" Hobbs asked. Throughout the city, an alarm blared, and their watches beeped. The city paused for a moment to take their doses of equilibrium – of Prozium, the chemical that shaped the world into what it was. A peaceful world, bereft of war and grief and anger.

Will blinked. Hobbs' voice was uncharacteristically soft. "What was that?" he asked.

He watched Hobbs take his injection. He wet his lips, and looked to Will. "It does," he said, much more evenly. Will hummed, and put the syringe to his neck, injecting himself with his dose. Prozium felt like a warm bath and a heavy blanket, suppressing everything but the most gentle of emotions. Amusement, sometimes, that crested like waves. Restlessness that Will channeled into training. He saw Hobbs' expression flatten, and nodded to himself, making a note to monitor his partner and, perhaps, suggest he up his dose. If Hobbs was feeling emotional towards the end of his cycles, he might need to take it more often, or take a higher concentration of it with a slower, longer release. Some people needed it, but that was alright; all for the greater good.

A knock on the window drew his attention, and Will turned, rolling down the window to greet the helmeted man. "Cleric," he said, sounding breathless from his run. "There's an incident happening in the stadium. We can't take the shot without endangering people."

Will nodded, and got out of the car. "What kind of incident?" he said, making sure his guns were loaded and ready.

"A sense offender has a firearm," the helmet replied, and Will heard a gunshot coming from the stadium. He rushed forward, Hobbs and a company of guards at his heels, and ascended the stairs into the back of the stadium. Father stood there, a hologram encased in glass, and there were a thousand people sitting on the plain grey blocks that made seats. There was a rise in the front where Father stood, and a man was brandishing his weapon, shouting and firing into the air and surrounded by a circle of armed men.

Will strode forward, between the impassive people. The armed guards stood down as he approached and the man whirled on Will, his eyes wild and bright with an emotional sheen. He bared his teeth at Will and aimed for him.

"You stupid, mindless drones!" he screamed. "Look at you; you're all just…*sheep*! You should be scared for your fucking lives!"

He shot at Will's feet, but Will didn't slow his pace.

"You see?" the man yelled, and gestured to Will, looking out to the crowd for a reaction. Any reaction. He would find none; the dose was fresh with the populace and they had nothing to fear. "What kind of reaction is that?"

The man fired, shooting a man in the head and killing him instantly. Will paused, eyeing the dead man, the little bead of blood welling from his forehead. He unhooked his guns and handed them to Hobbs.

"Easy," he said, one hand lifted in a placating gesture. "Easy now. No one here means you harm."

"Well…they should!" the man replied, blustering like an enraged bull. There was sweat on his brow, and Will could taste the thunder of his heart. It was beating so wildly; a wonder that the man hadn't passed out already from the fit of his own emotion. "I just killed my wife! She fucked another man, so I killed her."

His gaze landed on Hobbs, then on Will. He sneered.

"I'm a menace to your fucked-up excuse for a society."

Behind him, a small whisper spread through the crowd. Discontent, there and gone again. He walked up the steps until he was close to the man.

"Maybe you are a menace," Will said, and gestured to the man he killed. Then to the crowd. "But you're wrong about the rest. This is something that works," he said calmly, evenly. "Better than it ever has." The man looked too young to remember the war. He was young enough to feel entitled to passion. Foolish.

"*Works*?" the man repeated, and he laughed. He was crying too – that was strange. Will frowned, and tilted his head. "All these sheep should be scared shitless! Running for their lives from the crazed man with a gun! Feeling *something*."

"Like what you're feeling right now?" Will murmured, stepping closer. The man blinked at him, and looked down at his gun. His hand was shaking. Will managed a small smile, though it felt plastic on his own face. "Stress, depression, when was the last time you saw someone crying, when was the last time you heard of someone overdosing on drugs? It's all gone." Another step. "Anger, sadness…. Jealousy…"

The man's shoulders dropped. More tears fell.

"What the fuck do you want from me?"

Will's smile was probably too sharp, but in his defense, he hadn't had reason to practice it very often. "All I want is for you to stop shaking," he said softly. "I want you to stop *dreading*, to stop feeling this rage in your chest…"

From his pocket, he drew a vial of Prozium, and offered it.

"You can make it all go away."

The man's eyes fell to the golden vial in his hand. He swallowed, and lowered his gun. Will struck in that moment, grabbing the man's gun and twisting it from his hand hard enough to snap his wrist. The man cried out in pain and Will took him by the back of his neck, kicked his knee back in its own joint, and slammed him down to the ground.

Immediately, helmets came in to subdue him, and Will looked up and found Hobbs watching. He did not smile. Hobbs didn't either.

It was common practice for a Cleric to attend a meeting with the second consulate for a debriefing after a trip to the Outlands. Will walked calmly through the grey, vaulting halls, escorted by two armed guards. He appreciated the lack of scent or color in the space; all such things did was distract the eye and take away his focus.

He approached a desk, behind which was sat a man with an open file in front of him. The man looked to be his age, though without troubling emotions to put wrinkles around the eyes and the mouth, it was difficult to determine without obvious sagging or greying of the skin and hair. The room was barren, save for a statue of a titan holding up what remained of the world, slowly rotating. Beside the man sat another, typing away as Will approached.

The man smiled at him, his mouth twisting in such a way that pulled his lips in, showing the edges of his teeth. He looked like he didn't get to smile a lot, either, and was out of practice. "Cleric," he greeted, his voice sharp and nasal. "Ever so punctual." He sat forward, putting his elbows on the table. "Come closer, let me see you."

Will obeyed, stepping into the brightest of the halos of light, coming to a stop before the desk. The man's eyes met his, and he folded his fingers together and propped his chin up with them, taking Will's straight and rigid stance in with a slow, up-and-down drag.

His tongue tipped out, touching his upper lip. "I assume you know who I am?"

Will nodded. "Of course, Sir," he replied, holding his hands behind his back. "Vice-Council Mason Verger. Father's voice."

Mason smiled at him, tapping his fingers against his chin as he gave Will another slow onceover. Like Will was some interesting piece of contraband he had never seen, and would just as easily see destroyed as hung up for his viewing pleasure.

"Yes," he said slowly, and lowered his hands, fingers laced, tapping the edges of his knuckles on his desk. "I've heard a lot about you, Cleric." He stood, and Will remained still, eyes fixed forward, as Mason circled the desk, coming to a stop beside Will. He brushed a finger through the dust on Will's shoulder, and Will's jaw clenched. He should have brushed himself down before coming here. "I've been told that you are, shall we say, the veritable Fourth Horseman of the Tetragram. That you were raised in the Cleric Monasteries."

Will nodded, once. Mason paused, head tilted, and almost absently tugged at the hair gathered and flattened to the nape of Will's neck, out of the collar of his uniform. Will stiffened at the brush of fingers along his skin. It felt cold, like being touched by a concrete wall. Unyielding, as Father's voice should be.

Mason hummed, as though Will's lack of response was a test, and he circled behind Will. Will resisted the urge to follow him with his eyes, though his other senses remained keenly attuned to the other man, wanting to monitor his position.

"I'm told there is no one better, or more skilled, at doing what you do."

Will's brow creased. A warmth that felt dangerously close to pride flickered like a burning ember, quickly squashed out. "I do what I can, Sir," he said.

Mason hummed, and Will's periphery caught him again, as Mason stopped at the second man in front of his desk and turned, leaning against it, his hands in the pockets of his grey coat. His head tilted, eyeing Will like a curious cat would eye a rustle in the bushes.

He smiled, that twisted and parted-lip smile, showing his teeth. "What you can," he repeated coolly. "And you can do so much, can't you, Cleric? That…what was it, certain gift of empathy you have. I'm told you can find contraband wherever it may be hidden." Will pressed his lips together, fingers curling behind his back. Mason's grin widened, his chin lifted. "That you have a nose for it." Will had nothing to say to that; his record spoke for itself. "Why do you think that is?"

Will's brow creased. His eyes flashed to Mason, the blue of his iris so bright it looked ghostly, shining in the harsh light that illuminated them from above. Mason's smile was unmoving, stuck in time like the portrait of that woman. Like he held a secret Will would never know.

"I -." He hesitated, swallowed, and set his eyes forward again. "I can't say, Vice-Council. I suppose I just have the ability to put myself in their shoes, and look where I would hide contraband if I were one of them." Mason hummed, eyelids lowering, and he looked Will up and down again. "It's statistics, Sir, just like the Tetragram training."

"If you were one of them," Mason repeated, brows lifting. "A sense offender."

"Yes, Sir," Will replied evenly.

Mason was quiet another moment, and then he stood, going back to his seat behind his desk. There was a file in front of him, and he opened it, and Will didn't react as he saw his own face clipped to the report inside. "What did you find during your raid today, Cleric?"

"Paintings, Sir," Will replied.

Mason nodded, fingers tracing the lines of Will's face in his photograph. A fissure of something unnamable, but restless and discomfited, pulled at the back of Will's neck, before the Prozium soothed it away. "And the result was?"

"Incineration, Sir. As always."

Mason hummed. "How did you feel about that?"

Will's brow creased, confusion turning his mouth down. "I'm…. I'm sorry, Sir, I don't think I understand the question."

"How did you feel?" Mason repeated, his eyes sharp under the bright lights illuminating him. He smiled. "Watching those old and priceless artifacts burn, knowing they would never be seen again by the human eye?"

Will didn't understand. Did that matter? It was contraband, and hidden under a floorboard. It certainly wasn't being seen by the human eye, where it was. Wasteful; better to burn it all. He shook his head. "I didn't feel anything, Sir," he replied, still confused. "I did my job as I knew how to do it best. Has the law for recovery and dealing with contraband changed?"

"No," Mason said. He looked down at the file again, and Will saw that, opposite his picture, there was one of a woman. Mason blinked down at the picture of her. "A family man, are you?" he asked.

"No, Sir," Will replied, shaking his head once. "I had a spouse, but she was arrested for sense offense and executed four years ago."

"Arrested," Mason repeated. "By yourself?"

"No, Sir. By another."

Mason's brows rose. "How, then, if you are so skilled at recognizing them, did you come to miss that she was a sense offender?"

Will hesitated. It would not do good to sully his record and reputation with someone so high in the council, but he could only answer honestly; "I've asked myself that question many times, Sir. I don't know."

Mason's eyes were focused on him, intent and intelligent, before he pursed his lips and closed the file. "Well, I can only hope that, like the rest of us, you are capable of learning from your past mistakes," he said, somewhat sharply. Will's fingers curled, and he pressed his lips together. "Do not let your vigilance lag, Cleric. You may still be needed for the battle against the resistance, and I cannot have myself doubting your ability."

Will shook his head. "No, Sir. Of course not."

Mason nodded, and dismissed him with a wave of his hand. Will turned away, and walked from the office with even strides. He thought of Hobbs, of the unevenness of his voice, and his brow creased, remembering the book. Plagued with a disturbing notion that, perhaps, his instincts were correct, he went to the contraband hall and approached the desk.

"I need to check on article 247-A," he told the guard. "It would have been entered today, by Cleric Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

The man nodded, and checked the large book in front of him. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Cleric, there has been no entries from Cleric Hobbs in weeks."

Will frowned. No, he and Hobbs had recovered multiple articles in the last few weeks. "You must be mistaken," he said tightly, a crest of aggravation rising up in him before it was soothed by the calming effects of the Prozium. "It would have been entered just this afternoon, and might not be in the records yet -."

"Cleric," the man interrupted, and turned the book so Will could see. "There's been nothing."

Will looked at the book, noting the list of names and items that had been entered. He turned the pages back for the last three days, and then to the latest entry. Nothing. Hobbs hadn't come here with the book, nor the music cassettes they had found two days ago, nor the little painting of a sunflower from the week before.

"Thank you," he said quietly, subdued and troubled. He turned and strode from the contraband hall, the soft flicker of suspicion turning into a sharp-honed point of certainty. Hobbs was stealing contraband, probably hoarding it somewhere. The only viable reason for that would be if he was committing sense offense.

He entered the Cleric facility, the deep orange of the bulbs overhead lighting his way between the rows of uniform and perfectly positioned desks. He approached his own, and sat. "Open screen," he commanded, and a section of his desk lifted, showing him a blank screen. "Found footage. Car camera, registered under Cleric Will Graham. Four forty-five this afternoon."

The screen buzzed, and loaded, and Will stared at himself and Hobbs as they drove back to the city that day. His head tilted, and he watched as the grainy version of himself said; "Every time we go out there, and come back, it hits me how far we've come."

He paused the video, and his eyes narrowed. He watched their watches beep. Watched Hobbs fiddle with the golden vial of Prozium in his hand, before he placed it in the injection gun and put it to his own neck. He rewound and played it again, but could not see for certain if, when Hobbs injected himself, the syringe was empty or not.

He huffed. "Exit," he said. "Stadium footage, five-thirty this afternoon." A number of screens pulled up, and Will focused on the one that had the man on the stage. He watched himself enter, Hobbs behind him. Watched Hobbs hang back – not out of fear, this was their training; one Cleric at a time, otherwise the statistics got messed up.

He watched the man fire at his own feet. Watched Hobbs freeze and reach for his gun, ready to defend him.

Will paused the footage, and sighed. No Cleric would have reacted like that. He could not even excuse it as a latency in Hobbs' dose, for they'd just taken a fresh round. He stood, closing the screen, and summoned a company of helmets to go to Hobbs' living quarters.

Hobbs had a daughter. Will banged on the door. "Cleric Hobbs!" he yelled. "Open up!"

There was a moment, and then the door opened, revealing his daughter. She looked at them with a placid enough expression, though her eyes were wide. "Cleric Graham," she greeted evenly. "How can I help you?"

"Abigail, is your father here?" Will asked, and took her to one side, waving the helmets in as they began to search the quarters.

Abigail shook her head. "No, Sir. He told me he was leaving for enforcement duty in the Outlands." She frowned. "With you."

Will pressed his lips together. "How long?"

"Weeks, now."

Another strike. Will nodded to her, and commanded that she wait outside. He went in, following the helmets room to room as they searched, tearing apart the cabinets, bookshelves, and beds in search of any contraband.

Will paused, hesitating outside the bathroom door. He turned his head, and opened it, revealing the same one he had; uniform and plain, white-tiled with a single bright light above the mirror cabinet. He approached it, his gloved hands trailing absently along the edge of the sink.

He crouched, checking beneath it. Nothing there. He straightened, and eyed the mirror again. Driven by an instinct he had learned long ago not to push aside, he felt at the edges of the cabinet. It was a single unit, placed into a hole in the wall, not attached to it. Carefully, he gripped the edges and wrenched the cabinet free.

Behind it were pipes in the wall, to allow water flow. There was a single little flat area where two pipes were fused together, and Will blew out a breath when he saw the stack of unused Prozium vials. Hobbs was a sense offender.

"Captain!" he called. The man entered, and Will left the room, gesturing to the stack. He found Abigail waiting in the hallway. "Did you know your father had stopped taking his dose?"

She blinked at him, and shook her head. "No, Sir, I swear."

Will tilted his head. Children were harder to examine, since they felt their emotions so strongly and it took several years past puberty to get their doses right, but he could sense no dishonesty in her, and didn't see any facial tics or that emotive sheen that he had come to associate with offenders in her eyes.

Will nodded to himself. "You will go with the Captain to the hall of records, so that the residential ownership can be updated to your name. You may receive a guardianship and patronage until you finish school, but you'll be taken care of there."

She nodded, not looking troubled. Of course she wouldn't. "I'm sorry, Sir, if I had known my father was a sense offender I would have reported him sooner," she said, and looked ashamed. As ashamed as one could be when taking their dose.

Will smiled, and patted her shoulder. "It's not obvious to everyone," he assured her. "And your father is very good at pretending. But I'll take care of it."

She probably knew what he meant by 'taking care of it', but didn't ask. Didn't shed a tear, as Will left the living apartments, and headed down to his car.

Will gave a single blink of acknowledgement as the passenger side door opened, and another Cleric sat inside. He smiled in greeting. "Good evening, Cleric," he said with a respectful nod. Will grunted in answer, his eyes fixed ahead.

After a pause, he asked; "What is your name?"

"Francis Dolarhyde, Sir," he replied with another nod. Will looked at him, eyeing the scar on his lip and the sharp darkness in his eyes. "Cleric, second class." Will nodded absently. A capable warrior, then; certainly no fresh-faced youth Will must be saddled with.

"I hope you're as pleased to be assigned me as I am for the placement. I asked to be partnered with you, specifically – I was told it was a career-making advancement."

Will hummed. Ambition. Not an offense in and of itself; it was expected for a Cleric to want to ascend in his ranks.

"Not that it's the only reason I'm pleased to be here," Francis continued. "You're the most intuitive of the Grammaton Clerics; everyone knows it. I'm intuitive, too." Will blinked, and nodded. "I hope to learn from you. How to focus, so that I miss no detail. So that I know what they're feeling before they feel it themselves…"

Will nodded again, and started his car, driving out to the gate. "I'm sure you'll perform admirably," he said.

GPS tracking on Hobbs' firearm told Will where he needed to go. It was in the carcass of an abandoned church that he found him, sitting in a pew and reading from the book of poetry. A convoy of guards had stationed themselves outside, Francis waiting with them – even if Hobbs was a sense offender, he was a Cleric first, and they were not to be underestimated. Even with something as distracting and disarming as anger or passion to fuel them.

Will approached on silent feet, listening. Hobbs' mouth quirked in a smile, and he didn't look up at Will as he said; "You've always known, haven't you?"

Will stood in front of him, and with the muzzle of his gun, lifted the book. It was the same one he had stolen from the raid. *The Poetry of Yeats.*

Hobbs' smile was wide, wider than Will had ever seen it. "Ever had the pleasure?" he asked, lifting his book.

"Have you lost your mind?" Will hissed.

Hobbs hummed, and lowered his eyes to the book again. "But I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet. Tread softly…because you tread on my dreams." He looked up. "Do you dream, Will?"

Will wet his lips. The air was damp and humid here, and clung to the inside of his mouth. "You have to come with me."

Hobbs shook his head, smiling. The lights of the convoy speared the church, through the large circle of stained glass that had, somehow, survived all the purges. Will would do well to shoot it out when they were done here.

"How can you be so immune to it, Will? How can you not see?"

Will clenched his jaw, tightened the grip on his gun, and shook his head sharply. "You have to come with me, Garrett. I'll…. I'll make sure they go easy on you."

Hobbs laughed. "You and I both know they never go easy."

Will swallowed, and bowed his head. "Then I'm sorry."

A laugh escaped Hobbs, and he shook his head sadly. "No, you're not," he breathed. He didn't sound upset, though Will hadn't heard true sorrow in a long time aside from very short wails of anguish from offenders he had put down. There, and then gone again, a single cry and an echo of dust. "You don't even know what it means to be sorry. It's just a…vestigial word for something you've never felt." He sighed. "Don't you see, Will? It's all gone." He gestured to the hollow tomb of the church, to the altar, broken to pieces. To the pews, scattered around. "Everything that makes us what we are. Traded away."

"I am what I am," Will said. "There's no war, Hobbs. No murder."

Another laugh. "So, what do you call what we do?"

Will's teeth met each other, grinding harshly. Any other man would have been dead already; Will had hoped he would see reason. Hope; another vestigial word. In truth he felt nothing except soft, persistent waves of frustration for his partner's stubbornness.

"You're wrong," he finally managed. "You've seen what this does to people, Hobbs. You've been with me; the rage, the hatred, and the anger…"

"A heavy cost," Hobbs conceded. His hand twitched in his lap, and Will's eyes fell to his gun, resting there. He stiffened, and lifted his pistol in readiness. "I pay it gladly."

"Don't," Will said, watching him grip the gun. Hobbs smiled at him, and lifted the book between their eyes.

Will had no choice. He shot, felling the man he had worked with for close to a decade. Still, as he watched the book tumble from the man's limp hand, as he watched the body slump and crumble onto the floor, all he felt was aggravation for his partner's unworthy fate, as a Cleric,

as an offender both. To be gunned down like a dog was not the kind of death he would wish on anyone who didn't deserve it.

His own thoughts troubled him, casting a fresh wave of anxious restlessness through his body. His fingers flexed on his gun, and he lowered it.

"Cleric!" came the call. "Is it done?"

"Yes," Will replied, and bent down to retrieve the book. He sighed, and handed it over to the lead helmet. "Make sure this is properly logged."

"Of course, Sir," the man said with a nod, and waved the rest of his people in. Will left the church, and for good measure, shot at the stained glass until it fell in a cascade of colored moonlight, tinkling on the ground like music. A memory rose in him, splashing water and childish laughter, but he pushed it aside.

"Cleric," Francis said, drawing Will out of his thoughts. He looked to the man to see him eyeing Will with a small, impressed smile. "I can only hope, one day, to be as uncompromising as you."

Will swallowed, and climbed back into his car, only waiting long enough for Francis to join him, before he turned around and drove back to the city. He dropped Francis off at his lodgings, bidding him a good night, and then went home.

His home was like every other; grey and sleek and efficient. No decorations, no distractions, except for the large projected screen in the living room where Father could speak. He passed by the room, hearing Father's voice again congratulating the nation on their sacrifice for the greater good.

No good emotions, but no bad ones either; no rage, no love, no jealousy, no war, no joy.

A little light blinked at the phone by his bed, and he brought up the screen to see Alana's face. He smiled at her in greeting – she had been in the monastery with him, but showed a better aptitude for desk work, and was now one of the librarians tasked with keeping the records.

"Will," she greeted.

"You may get a visit from Abigail Hobbs tonight," Will told her. "If you haven't already."

"I have," she replied.

Will nodded, sitting on his bed. "Her father was my partner," he told her. She would already know this, and the useless information made him pause, wondering why he bothered with it. He shook it off, and said; "He was guilty of sense offense, and had to be put down."

"By you?" Alana asked.

Will hesitated a moment, looking down at his feet, and wondered why his chest felt oddly heavy when he said, "Yes."

Alana hummed. "It was the right thing to do, Will. I'm very proud."

Proud. Were they allowed to feel pride anymore? His brow creased, but the uncertainty vanished along with everything else. "Thank you."

"Abigail's records have been updated. She's going to be tested for Clerical aptitude, and placed in a homing center while everything is updated to her name before she can return to her living quarters. There should be minimal interruption to her daily life."

"Good," Will replied, and nodded. He turned to her and gave her another nod. "Thank you for informing me."

"Good night, Will," she said, and Will closed the screen, ending the call. He sighed. His bed was a set of two, with a single rise instead of a pillow, the air perfectly controlled so he needed no blankets or other unnecessary comforts. The other side of the bed was barren, made for a person who was no longer there.

Curiously, he felt the absence of another person. More than usual. It was not for his spouse, or for his previous partner – rather, he felt a strange need to reach out and feel anything. Anything at all. The house was so silent. Waves of something dangerously close to loneliness touched the edges of his mind, and with a frustrated growl, he rose from his bed and located his Prozium gun.

He injected himself with an extra dose, sighing in relief when he felt its effects take him immediately, soothing his distress and returning him to the blandness of a peaceful mind. And yet, his own actions felt like they should frustrate him. He was brimming on the edges of something close to annoyance – aggravation at his lack of feeling. Aggravated at his mind's dogged determination to feel *anything*.

Perhaps he needed a greater dose, himself. He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face, and returned to bed.

He woke to the dawn, the film over his window protecting him from the severity of the sunrise but allowing him enough light to see by. He rose, sighing to himself, brimming with some unnamable restlessness that spurred him out of bed. He remembered the scent of coffee, from his childhood, before that became contraband. All stimulants and depressants were contraband; opiates, caffeine, nicotine, alcohol. There was no place for that in a society where everyone was well-rested and no one needed a little pick-me-up or the bliss of oblivion.

He gathered his morning dose of Prozium and went to his bathroom, eyeing himself in the mirror, before he started the water and cupped his hand beneath the stream, drinking a small sip to clear the cotton from his mouth. He needed to be better at brushing his teeth before bed; the Outlands always felt dusty and wet, and left him with a terrible taste in his mouth.

He ran his hands through his hair, and splashed water on his face, grabbing his towel to dry off. His hand knocked the little golden vial, and he could not catch it in time, before it fell and shattered on the floor.

He looked down at it, sighing through his nose. With taking an extra dose last night, and missing this one now, he would need to go to the dispensary to report the loss and ask for a refill. He brushed his teeth and changed into his uniform, the restlessness made worse by the additional task. The lines were always bad in the dispensary, what with the population so large and accidents like this happening all the time. He would have to hurry or risk a rise in emotion before he could correct it.

He left his lodgings and froze when he saw Francis standing outside. The man smiled at him widely, giving him a nod of greeting. "Cleric," he murmured. "Good morning. We have an assignment. There's a sense offender in the city."

Will pressed his lips together.

"You've also been summoned to a meeting with Vice-Council Verger," Francis told him. "To brief him on the events of last night."

Of course. Will did, technically, go to the Outlands and participated in an enforcement task. He nodded, closing the door, and followed Francis to the car.

Francis drove him to the council building, and Will entered.

"Cleric Graham," Mason greeted, crowing his name in something akin to delight. "Thank you for coming so quickly. This is strictly routine, you understand."

"Of course, Sir," Will replied, keeping his voice even.

Mason hummed. "Come closer, Cleric. I don't like shouting." Will frowned, for the room was perfectly acoustically designed that no whisper could go unheard, but he nodded, and stepped forward as he had the day before. Mason stood, circling his desk again. He brushed a hand over Will's shoulder, though there was no dust, and Will pressed his lips together. "You encountered your previous partner, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, in an abandoned cathedral in the restricted section, is that correct?"

"Yes, Sir," Will said.

Mason smiled at him, sharp, teeth gleaming in the harsh light. Will had no ability to feel a prey animal instinct, discomfort at having teeth so close to him, but he couldn't deny that Mason's proximity was making him…restless. He didn't like it, though the Prozium did its best to soothe away his discomfort. "How would you describe his state of mind?"

Will pressed his lips together, and sighed through his nose. "He was emotional, Sir." Mason's head tilted curiously. "He was not making rational decisions. I believe he was being governed by…passions."

"So you shot him," Mason said.

Will nodded. "Destruction is the penalty for ceasing the dose, Sir. The penalty for feeling."

"Of course," Mason replied with a nod, waving it away with a dismissive hand. He circled behind Will, and Will stiffened at how close he came, natural body heat soaking through Will's uniform, breath hot and moist against his ear; "But would it not have been better to take him to the House of Justice, for more clinical and informed interrogation? Potentially leading to more crucial evidence, or knowledge of any co-conspirators?"

Will frowned. The Prozium in his system licked at the base of his skull, trying to soothe his confusion, but it would not be beaten back. 'Clinical' interrogation? He had never heard it phrased like that. What could one possibly use to interrogate a Cleric?

"I felt he would not come willingly, Sir," he finally managed. "And he was armed. It was more likely that it would have resulted in harm to myself or one of the convoy, if I had attempted to take him in without a fight." He turned his head, to meet Mason's eyes. "It would have caused an incident."

Mason eyed him, lips pursed. "Of course," he said quietly, contemplative. He stepped away, and Will let out his breath slowly. "And in any case, I'm sure something like that couldn't have been easy to do."

Will's brow creased.

"You worked with Hobbs for many years, after all. You spent so much time with him, just to shoot him – a man you could, conceivably, call your friend." Will's fingers flexed at his back, more confusion, more of an aggravating lack of *something* cresting in his mind. "How did that make you feel?"

Will's brow creased again, and he met Mason's eyes. "Sir?"

"It's a simple enough question, Cleric," Mason said mildly. His eyes shone with that too-bright, icy color. "How did you feel, shooting your friend?" His voice had gone high, like offenders did when they were angry.

Will shook his head. "I felt nothing."

Mason hummed, and sat back at his desk with a sigh. "Alright, Cleric. You have a scheduled arrest and recovery mission this morning, yes?"

"Yes Sir," Will replied, relaxing at the introduction of a new topic. He didn't like thinking of Hobbs. He was a sense offender, and deserved to be put down. It was the law, and the law kept them all safe. "It's my next task today as soon as we're done here."

Mason smiled again, and nodded to himself. "Very well. Off you go."

Will nodded, and turned, leaving the building. That strange restlessness was building in him again, causing a slight quickening of his pace as he hurried to leave. He would feel better once the raid was finished with and he could go to the dispensary to replace his dose.

He knew he should tell Francis that he had to go to the dispensary before the raid, but that could take most of the morning, and Cleric assignments were to be carried out immediately. Raids must be done while the iron is still hot, otherwise the offenders inside could scatter or hide themselves away before they were caught and dealt with. He would skip his morning dose, and take the afternoon one, and no one would be the wiser. He could control himself for a morning. He hoped.

Hope. A strange fluttering in his chest made him frown, and he pressed his lips together and clenched his fist, steeling himself against the emotion. He had always been restless, wanting to move, to learn; something the Prozium could never soothe out of him, though he had done his best to harness and focus it on his training. It was why he was the best at what he did; there was no rest for him, no respite, until the job was done.

He spied Francis outside, and paused, sucking in a breath as he *felt* the air. A soft breeze from the direction of the sunrise, touching his hair and brushing along his cheeks. The Cleric's garb was leather, from neck to toe, and so he felt it nowhere else, but the heat of the sun and the little breeze on his face was suddenly so much more than a background acknowledgement of pleasant weather.

He looked to the sunrise, and the blue and pink sky, and wondered if it had always looked so…*pretty*.

"Cleric?" Will turned, seeing Francis standing by the car, waiting for him. He nodded, and approached, and they got in. A convoy met them at the end of the street, and though Francis had already told him as much, he was surprised to note that the directions programmed into his car's computer were not set to take them out of the city, but rather remain inside it.

An offender living within the city walls was rare, for everyone was so vigilant within Libria. Will led the convoy to an old building, plain and grey on the outside, but shaped in such a way that it had clearly, in the old days, been something else. A single family home, a brownstone, it was called. The house itself did not draw attention, like nothing else was meant to draw attention, but stood out simply for the fact that it was not a living space like the others.

Will got out of the car with Francis and a helmet approached them. "How many inside?"

"Just the one, Cleric," the man replied. "As far as we could gather."

Will nodded, and approached the house. If there was only one man, then the chances of a shootout were low, but he had learned many years ago not to underestimate a sense offender. Emotions made people stupid, and also made them strong. Willing to fight and die for what they loved.

His attention was drawn at the sound of metallic clicks, mechanisms locking into place, and he turned to see Francis readying his firearm. His brow lifted. "Are you expecting resistance?" he asked.

Francis gave him a wide, unrepentant grin. "Something you'll learn about me, Cleric," he said; "I'm a cautious person by nature, always expecting the worst."

Will hummed, and then looked back at the sound of a small series of explosions, the front door blown off its hinges by the helmets. He entered the house and saw a single man standing in the hallway, his eyes dark and his expression settled into a deep frown. He was furious; Will felt it, saw it in his eyes.

"You are not welcome here," the man said shortly. His accent denoted him as not American – he must have come before the cross-continental restrictions were put in place, a long time ago. "You cannot just enter my home and -."

"We're Tetragrammaton," Will replied coolly. "There's nothing we can't do."

The man's eyes flashed with open anger, his shoulders tight and set into a sharp line. He moved for Will, set to stop him in his tracks, and Will grabbed him swiftly, turning him and wrenching his arm behind his back. The man's anger seemed to push at him, a strange fire lighting itself in his chest that he could never remember feeling, and he gripped the man tightly as he struggled, his other hand going to his hair and twisting to reveal his neck.

"How long have you been off the dose?" he demanded, another wave of frustration combining with his restlessness, growing thorns. He was aggravated; he was *angry*. Why did people keep insisting on *feeling*? The man didn't answer him, tense and snarling with rage. He bucked against Will's grip on him and Will's mouth twisted in an answering growl, and he slammed the man up against the wall, cracking the mirror that hung there. "Look at you!" he snapped.

The man's eyes met his in the mirror. He was flushed, breathing hard, and Will's fingers flexed, twisting in his hair, which had been moved from the slick do most of the population wore. It hung in front of his eyes – those eyes, alight with the sheen of emotion, and dark like warm earth wetted with blood. With whiskey. Will never knew the taste, but he remembered the color.

He released the man abruptly, his palms warm, fire stinging the base of his skull. The waning dose of Prozium he had taken last night tried to soothe him, but he could not be soothed. "Look at you," he breathed again, and saw the man's eyes meet his in the mirror, and, barely there, a twitch of a smile.

Will turned away with a clenched jaw, swallowing his aggravated snarl. "The mirror frame is illegal," he snapped. "Destroy it."

Helmets grabbed the man, and Francis came behind them, pulling the mirror off the wall and smashing it on the floor. The man's mouth twisted into another scowl, and Will turned away from him, going down the halls which were plainly decorated. He hummed, lifting his head, eyeing the walls. "Do you live here alone?" he asked the man.

No answer.

Will's fingers trailed along one of the walls. After a moment, he took off his glove, testing the plaster. It was oddly cool, and he turned back to find the man glaring at him. "Who else do you know who's stopped their dose?"

The man laughed. "Now, Cleric, I couldn't possibly give that away."

Will hummed. Fair enough; he didn't expect an offender to just break down and confess. People like this man had to be good at hiding. His eyes lingered on the man's tie – he was dressed in a fine suit, not like the jumpsuits and grey clothes the rest of the population wore. There were threads of red in the fabric, and he frowned. His tie was contraband as well, too brightly colored with swirls of gold and black to possibly be legal.

Will's fingers curled. He approached the man, and slowly unraveled his tie, wrapping the soft fabric around his knuckles. It was a pleasant sensation, the tightness and heat of it lingering from the man's skin. He breathed in, smelling something he wasn't used to; something sharp that stung the back of his throat and made him feel thirsty.

He turned away again, feeling the man's sharp eyes on him, and tested the wall. "Here," he said.

The demolition team came forward, setting their charges in a neat rectangle on the wall. Will stepped back as it was blown open, revealing an open space behind it. Will nodded to himself, waving away the dust. "Keep him cuffed and sweep the rest of the house," he commanded.

Two helmets stationed themselves with the man, and Will stepped into the room. He found a light switch, and turned it on, his eyes widening when he saw the veritable horde of contraband inside. Art hung on the walls, and there were explosions of color everywhere in the form of beaded cushions, and lavish table decorations. Golden statues and vases made of colorful glass.

He stepped into the room, marveling at it all. It was easily the largest horde he had seen in a while, since the beginning of the purges. He reached out, his fingertips brushing cool glass, and gasped at the feeling of it. It was cold, sending an icy fissure up to his wrist. He touched a fine silk that was spread out along a couch, and tested the softness of it, the delicate material. It was the same pink as the sunrise, and Will found himself staring at it for far longer than he should have.

Above the silk was a painting. It was of a woman, laid in repose, a swan stationed between her legs. Will frowned at it, eyeing the woman's face, the expression of ecstasy painted into her mouth and eyes. The swan, with its wings unfurled and ready; anticipatory.

Movement drew his attention, and Will hurriedly stepped away from the painting to see the man there, still held by two helmets. His lips pursed. "You're going to burn it all, aren't you?" he asked.

"Eventually," Will replied, putting his glove back on. "But you couldn't have amassed all this yourself. It will be logged and collected, and examined for clues on your co-conspirators."

The man glared at him, and suddenly, with a jerk of his hands, he'd freed himself from one of the cuffs and grabbed the back of a helmet's neck, slamming the man forward into the broken edge of the wall. His visor smashed and he cried out in pain, and the second one raised his weapon, only to have it grabbed, and turned, so that he ended up shooting his fellow helmet instead of the offender.

A swift jerk relieved the living helmet of his weapon, and the man grabbed the gun, and shot him in the face. Will rushed forward, aiming his own pistol, and it was knocked away with an expert twist. He huffed in frustration, and brought his second one up, but for each time he rose to aim, his hands were either batted away or the man was not where he should have been, statistically. Bullets embedded themselves in the wall behind him, and when his magazines were empty, Will dropped his pistols to the ground.

The man did the same with his weapon, a smile curling his lips that looked almost playful. His eyes were bright, not with animal fear for being killed, but like he was enjoying himself. Humor, coloring them gold. Will aimed for his sternum, which was usually higher than men thought to defend, but his jab was cut off and his wrist caught, his arm twisted behind him just as he had done to the man on entry to his house.

He was slammed against the wall, and gritted his teeth, reaching back to aim for eyes, hair, anything soft and easily exploited. The man's other hand caught his, wrenching it up so both his wrists were held high at his back, in danger of dislocating at the shoulders and elbows.

The man laughed – it was a low sound, and touched the base of Will's skull like a fissure of anger; heat, though he knew it wasn't quite rage that he was feeling. He didn't know what he was feeling, but he *was* feeling, and that alone was so strange that he forgot how to get out of a handhold like this. Only knew that he shouldn't have let himself be compromised in the first place.

The man leaned in, his nose to Will's neck above the collar of his uniform, and breathed in raggedly.

"Did you just smell me?" Will demanded, confusion creasing his brow. He couldn't think of any emotion that would warrant this kind of behavior.

"Difficult to avoid," the man replied. He was smiling; Will could hear it in his voice. His fingers clamped around Will's wrists, powerful and long. Will could hear the sounds of other helmets, undoubtedly led by Francis, approaching. They would subdue the offender easily. It was unfortunate that he was overwhelmed, and he felt his cheeks heating in a flicker of something like embarrassment. He was the best in his class, the best in the entire order, and he'd been taken down by a *sense offender*.

He cleared his throat. He shouldn't be feeling embarrassed. He shouldn't be feeling anything. Even when the man's nose dragged through his hair, over the arch of his ear. Even when his knee nudged the back of Will's, testing its lock.

The man laughed again. "You fought well, Cleric," he said warmly. Affectionately. Will grit his teeth and swallowed, fingers curling into fists. His heart was racing – it hadn't done that in

years, since Will was a child. Adrenaline, that was caused by adrenaline. A rush of fight or flight, sharpening him for something he'd already lost.

There was a shout; Francis, calling the helmets to his aid.

The man hummed. "A pity we will have to cut this meeting short. It's a shame; it's been a long time since I met someone with your…reputation." Will blinked, brow furrowing, but the man laughed again before he could speak. "I hope the Prozium hasn't dulled your curiosity, Will; I think it would be very entertaining to have someone like you trying to catch me."

Will huffed, and tried to twist his hands, to grab the man and hold him still long enough for the helmets to reach him. "It'll be a short hunt," he promised.

"Oh?" The man nuzzled him again, such an animal and affectionate gesture that Will felt his heart stutter in his chest, like it, too, was blinking in shock. It was the most anyone had touched him in years, since he had a spouse, and even then their relationship was scarcely more affectionate than the two nights a month they had sex while she was most fertile. They had been matched due to genetic compatibility, but never managed to conceive before she was arrested and taken away.

He frowned. Thoughts of his wife never plagued him – neither did the odd, panging echo in his chest that felt like a hollow drum. What in the world was happening to him?

"I don't think I should be concerned," the man said, drawing Will's thoughts back to him. He'd lost his train of thought, lost focus – unforgiveable. Shame heated his ears and he shouldn't feel shame. He shouldn't be in this position in the first place. Something was wrong with him.

Abruptly, he was turned, his back slammed against the wall so suddenly and harshly the wind was knocked out of him. The man gathered his wrists again, and pinned them above his head, his other hand gripping Will's neck tight and wide, forcing him to lift his chin and control his breathing as the man met his eyes. He was flushed from exertion, his gaze bright with emotion, with feeling, and Will didn't know what to call it. He didn't know why a man would look at him like that and feel *hungry*.

The man smiled, showing his teeth, and touched his thumb to Will's chin. He had the look of a predator about him, sharp-edged and starving. "They say you have a gift of empathy, Cleric," he said, and Will wanted to know how the fuck he was meant to know that, but he supposed reputation was bound to spread, even so far as to the offenders. "What do you see, when you look at me?"

"Someone I'm going to destroy," Will replied. "An offender."

The man laughed. "So do I," he purred, and tapped Will's chin again. "You see, I am quite gifted myself. I can smell emotion in a man, like a disease. The plague of happiness, the cancer of rage." He leaned in, and put his nose to Will's hair, breathing in deeply.

"And you, my dear Cleric," he whispered, voice heavy in Will's ear. Will shivered, another fierce surge of heat running down his spine and gathering behind his pounding heart. "You

positively *reek* of it."

Will growled, and brought his knee up. This close, the hit was awkward and, he was sure, did more for shock than actual damage, and it made the man laugh. He slid his hand to the back of Will's neck and Will didn't have time to fight him off before the man's mouth was on his, and Will went still. His lips were soft, and warm; kissing had never felt like that before. Had never felt so…*urgent*.

Then, it was gone. His wrists and neck were released, and the man gave him another charming smile. "Until next time, darling," he purred. "You can keep the tie."

And with that, he was gone, disappearing down the other end of the corridor in his house. Will swallowed, his hands shaking, trying to recover as quickly as he could. He should give chase. He should capture the man and bring him to justice. He should, he should -.

He didn't. He was frozen, knees locked, heart pounding, and then Francis rounded the corner and his voice shattered Will's thrall. "Cleric!" he said, rushing forward. Will cleared his throat and turned away from him, trying to calm the red in his cheeks and the rush of his heart. He was breathing hard, and hoped Francis blamed the fight for that. "Cleric, what happened?"

Will growled. "He got away," he said. His eyes lingered on the room, with its fine silks and artwork, and his lip twitched in an angry snarl. He looked down at the men, dead at his feet. Two good men had *died* and Will had let the murderer get away.

"He escaped?" Francis repeated, eyes wide.

"He…. I was examining the room. He got the drop on the helmets," Will said, forcing his voice to remain even. "He was gone by the time I got out."

Francis nodded, accepting that. "Sweep the house!" he commanded the remaining helmets, and then he put a hand on Will's arm. "He won't get far. He's unarmed and we know his face."

Will nodded. "Whose name is the house registered under?" he asked one of the helmets who had remained behind.

The man held a screen in his hands, and brought up the house details. He frowned, and opened his visor. "There's no listed name, Cleric," he said. Will bit back another snarl of frustration, wiping his gloved hands on his coat.

"Alright," he muttered. "Log and report everything in this room and everything else you find. He can't have gathered this all himself and there might be information somewhere leading to another group."

With that, he left the house. Francis followed him, and once they were outside, they leaned against the car, waiting for the helmets to finish, their eyes lingering on the sides of the house to watch and see if the offender tried to escape that way.

After a moment, Francis cleared his throat. "Why didn't you let contraband control take that?" he asked evenly. Everything was even these days. Will turned to him, frowning in confusion,

and followed Francis' line of sight to the man's tie, which was sticking out of his pocket. He took it out, curling it around his fingers.

He cleared his throat. "They miss things, sometimes," he said slowly, and wondered at the odd, distinctly powerful wave of possessiveness that surged in him, looking at the tie. He didn't want it to burn. He wanted to keep it. "I'd like to take it to evidence and log it myself."

Francis nodded, accepting that. The helmets finished clearing the house, and they got into the car, and led the convoy back to the contraband hall.

Chapter 2

Will went to his desk, and sat down at it, sighing heavily. His thoughts continued to linger on the man, and every time he thought of him, his heart seized and hammered in his chest double-time. His fingers flexed, feeling restless, wanting to grab something. His mouth burned with lingering warmth, and he couldn't stop thinking about the way the man had smiled at him.

The man had known his name. He'd known about his empathy, his emotions. Had known about *him*. Even with Will's reputation, the way he'd fought suggested knowledge of the Tetragrammaton fighting system. Statistics, easily evaded and overcome. Will could not blame his lapse in Prozium on that; the man had known how to fight. How to overpower even someone as technically skilled as a first-class Cleric. That kind of training didn't just happen.

"Open screen," he commanded. "Third sector cameras." He sighed, tapping his fingers absently against the side of the screen. After a moment, he gave the address, the cameras giving him a view of the street. He adjusted the timestamp and played it, squinting at the grainy filter as he watched himself approach with the convoy. Watched them enter. Watched them leave.

He hadn't come out that way.

He sighed to himself, and ran a hand through his hair. Frustration gnawed at his skull, giving him a headache. Strange, and unwelcome – he could never remember having a headache before.

A thought occurred to him, and he adjusted the timestamp again to several hours later. His lips twitched in a victorious smile as he saw, from the innards of the building, the man emerge. "Pause, zoom in," he murmured, and his smile grew as the cameras caught a glimpse of the man's face.

He grabbed the picture and swept it into the national database. Offender or not, no citizen lived within the walls of Libria without being registered. He sat back as the facial recognition grabbed the man's eyes, his mouth, the distance between forehead and chin. Faces ran in a swift filter on the other side of the screen, until finally, they landed on one.

It was him. Will curled his fingers, bumping his hand against the table in victory. *Gotcha*.

Hannibal Lecter. A doctor, before the Third World War. Old enough to have lived through it. He had a registered space in the living quarters, as did everyone, but Will doubted he would find anything there. Clearly Hannibal had lived in that building for a long time to have made himself so at home.

He grinned, and closed the screen. He had a name, and a face, which meant he could pass it along to the guards and helmets in the city. Wherever Hannibal was hiding, he wouldn't be able to stay there for long. He would make a mistake. Offenders always did; they lacked the patience for a prolonged hunt.

He left the building to the sunset, and stopped, his eyes lingering on the oranges and pinks that stained the sky. Father could not control the weather, though Will wasn't sure the man wouldn't, one day, want to try. He would cover Libria with a dome and make sure the sky remained grey, just like the rest of the world.

The thought caused another echoing pang in his chest. Something like loss, like longing. He swallowed it back and headed home.

Father's voice filled his lodgings, and Will sighed, closing the door behind him and resting against it, eyes closed. He needed a moment, just to breathe and remain still.

"War. Violence. Murder. All of it, gone. At the steep cost of the highs, we have rid humanity of these dangerous, evil lows. There is no suffering. There is no madness. All that exists is a perfect world. A utopia. We did it, citizens of Libria. Without the burden of feeling, we are free to live."

Will's brow creased. He walked past the living room where Father's voice continued, his stern face plastered big and wide on the blank wall. He went to his bedroom and found his phone lit up with a waiting call, and sighed, schooling his expression before he answered it.

He froze, at the face that greeted him on the screen. It was not Alana's, or Francis', or anyone he expected. It was *him*. The offender, Hannibal Lecter. Will blinked at him, sure for a moment it must be some odd glitch, his search history combining with his phone records.

But then the man smiled at him, delighted and wide, and Will knew it was no trick of the light or technical malfunction.

"You," he hissed, and wondered how his throat didn't shatter from the force of it.

"Good evening, Will," Hannibal replied brightly. Will's eyes scanned his background, but he could see nothing that gave him a clue as to where Hannibal was hiding. He was merely standing in front of a flat, grey wall. Just like every other wall in Libria.

His eyes fell to Will's pocket, and Will pressed his lips together, drawing out the roll of his tie. He didn't take it to the contraband hall. He didn't want to. He carefully put it on the bedside table, unwilling to give Hannibal the satisfaction of seeing him admire it.

"How did you find my number?" Will demanded.

"It's not difficult, Will," Hannibal replied. "All information is public record. I know your date of birth, the names of your parents, your blood type." His lips spread in a smile, showing his teeth again. "Your wife's name."

"Ex-spouse," Will corrected him. Irritation licked at the back of his neck like a snake's tongue, and he pet over his nape as though it was a physical sensation he could soothe away.

He realized, abruptly, in his time spent searching for Hannibal's name and logging all the contraband found at his house, he'd missed his afternoon dose of Prozium.

He hesitated, but refused to let Hannibal see him falter.

"Right. Ex. She was someone who felt emotions too, wasn't she? Like me." Hannibal's head tilted.

"You should turn yourself in," Will said sharply, meeting his eyes. "Remand yourself to the Hall of Justice and you may find the law merciful."

Hannibal laughed. "The law is not merciful," he replied. "It is the law. It is incapable of mercy, or favoritism. Like Father would have the world be." Will frowned. "Tell me, Will, do Clerics like you gun down women and children?"

"If they are offenders," Will replied, and nodded. Though, children tended to be arrested and put back on their dose, and monitored until they returned to compliance. They were more difficult to get right the first time, but most of them returned to society once they were cured. "Destruction is the penalty for going off the dose, Hannibal, everyone knows that."

Hannibal blinked, and his smile turned fond and pleased. "Ah, so you have figured me out," he said. "You must either be very curious, or very determined."

"It's my job," Will replied. "Just like it's my job to hunt down your friends and bring them all to justice."

"Friends," Hannibal echoed. He met Will's eyes. The picture of him on the screen was a little blurry, hinting at a bad signal, but full color. Will could see the shades of grey and bronze in his hair, that reminded him of the mirror frame he'd ordered destroyed. Saw the red in his iris, and looked to the tie again. "I wonder, Will, do you have any idea what it truly means? Friendship?"

Will swallowed. "There's nothing you don't feel?" he asked, and Hannibal nodded. "What about guilt?" he demanded. Hannibal's jaw clenched, lips pursing in displeasure. "You're risking your friends' lives by refusing to come in. Whoever is hiding you will be brought to swift and immediate justice."

"Justice, or slaughter?" A touch of anger colored Hannibal's voice, and Will smiled, a tightness in his chest at seeing the man affected. "I rarely feel guilty about anything, Will."

"You stopped your dose," Will insisted. "You've broken the law."

"Whose law?" Hannibal returned. He had grown calm again, and fixed Will with a placid smile, and Will wondered what kind of doctor he had been before the war. Before the purge, and the Prozium. "It is the law of nature to feel things, Will. Every atom inside us demands to be felt; we are all explosions of light, and air, and color. It is the very essence of life to feel things. And yet you would have me resist it, and crush it with chemicals, on the off-chance that the things I feel prove dangerous."

"Emotions *are* dangerous," Will snapped. "Rage, jealousy, fear -." He stopped, shook his head. "Are you at all aware -?"

"Of the history of suffering grown out of the emotional nature of Man?" Hannibal smiled. "I am old enough to remember it being preached for the first time, Will. The Manifest Doctrine." He sighed, and for a moment, his gaze left Will, and went far away. "Man's inhumanity to Man, all because he can hate, and lust, and rage, and covet…"

Will thought of how Hannibal had kissed him, and he swallowed harshly. "You speak as though that's somehow inaccurate," he managed. "Do you deny that Man has tortured and mutilated his way through his entire existence? Until Libria, the only thing that set us apart from the animals was genocide."

Hannibal's eyes snapped to his again, dark, sharp. He looked at Will with a keen, scalping eye, that made Will feel curiously exposed. He didn't like that feeling at all – vulnerability, a prey animal with a predator in the grasses. He didn't like feeling that way; fear, fear was insidious. Fear could eat a man alive.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal murmured. "Why do you live?"

Will blinked. "I don't…." A sharp, frustrated sound left him. This was getting ridiculous. He should be setting up a trace on the call, taking his Prozium, calling his partner and a convoy to hunt Hannibal down. He should, he should -. "I'm…. As a Cleric and a citizen I have a function."

"And what is your function?" Hannibal asked, like Will was a child slowly figuring out the complexities of algebra. Coaxing. Controlled.

"I safeguard the continuity of this great society," Will finally managed, reciting what was part of the Clerics' Oath. "To serve and protect Libria."

"Doesn't that seem circular? You exist simply to continue your own existence. What's the point?"

"What's the point of *yours*?" Will demanded.

Hannibal smiled. "To feel." Will scoffed, turning away. "You cannot understand it, Will, because you have never known it. Your empathy can only get you so far – to truly understand, you must feel it for yourself. It's as vital as breath. And without it – without love, and rage, and sorrow, breath is just a clock. Ticking."

Will's shoulders tensed. He let out his breath, slowly. "And you're willing to be the seed of the destruction within your own society," he said.

"Oh, more than the seed," Hannibal replied happily. Will turned to him, frowning. How could he be smiling? "I have no fear of execution, no fear of death, Will – the inevitability of my own demise frees me to relish every moment of my life. You cannot know what it feels like, of course, but I assure you, it's worth it. Every low is met with a great high." He sighed. "It's a pity you are so resistant to feel it for yourself."

Will snarled, and rounded on him. "I don't need to feel!" he snapped. "I don't need it. No one does. *You* would understand that if you weren't being so…" He snarled to himself, angry at Hannibal, angry at his own emotions, for they were rising higher now, a drug addict on the brink of overdose. Or maybe withdrawal. He needed to get more Prozium.

"We're done here," he said, once he managed to get his voice calm enough, unwavering. He was stone. He was unmoving; the unfeeling outreached hand of law and judgement. He closed the screen, ending the call with Hannibal's smile burned into the backs of his eyelids, and left his lodgings again.

"This Prozium dispensary is closed for routine maintenance. Please locate your nearest dispensary for your dose. This Prozium dispensary…"

Will growled to himself, eyeing the sealed doors and listening to the repeated message playing on a loop. He turned, looking to the night sky, seeing one of the blimps with Father's face on it floating above the city. Further, to the stars. They glittered brightly above him, some winking in and out of existence as he watched. Distant flames, snuffed out for reasons he would never know.

He sighed, breath misting in the cold night air, and turned as he heard a car rumble up to him. "Good evening, Cleric!" Francis greeted. "We've got an assignment."

Will nodded, and got into the car. They left Libria, driving out to the Outlands, and pulled up on the outside of what had once been a factory, before the purge. There were already several helmets stations outside, the windows shot out, and Will pressed his lips together and exited the car.

He paused, head tilted, as he heard sounds that were not being made by people. He frowned as he approached, rounding the building, and froze when he saw a large gated area with a pack of chained up dogs, all barking and whining at the scent of blood that coated the air.

There had been a woman, guarding them. She lay dead at the gate.

Francis, beside him, huffed in distaste. "I've seen this before. Why do they keep these animals?" he asked, nose wrinkling. "Do they raise them for meat?"

Will pressed his lips together, eyeing the animals. In the wake of his silence, Francis hummed, and strode forward. "Kill them all," he commanded, and Will felt a cry of something sharp gather in his chest, lodge itself behind his teeth. He stepped forward, flinching as the guards raised their weapons, prepared to shoot through the fencing and put all the dogs down.

A man opened the gate, and a puppy rushed out, straight for Will. Without thinking, he bent down and picked it up. It was a brindle-colored animal, striped gold and black, like Hannibal's tie. The dog whined when Will picked it up, holding it at arms' length. Its dark

eyes looked at him, and it whined again, wriggling in his grip. Will tightened his hands, staring at it, and wondered at the soft, gentle affection he felt, looking at the animal. It was just a dog; diseased, probably. Vermin. Contraband.

"Good grab, Cleric," Francis said, and held out his hand. "Give it to me. I'll put it down."

Will didn't flinch, but it was a close thing. "No," he said harshly. "These…" He could feel Francis' eyes on him, confused, head tilted and brow furrowed. Suspicious. "These animals should…should be taken back for testing," he said in a rush, holding the puppy close to his chest, and turned back towards the car. "If there's a plague in the Outlands then the council needs to know about it."

He put the puppy in the trunk of Francis' car and drove away, feeling Francis' eyes on him the whole time.

He brought the puppy back to his apartment, at a loss of what else to do. He placed it in front of Father's face, and it whined at him, licking its muzzle and staring up at him with wide eyes. Will swallowed. "Uh. Stay."

The puppy huffed, and curled up at his feet. Will turned away from it, rushing back to his room. He pulled up his call records, and dialed the last one, that was unregistered and didn't come with a name.

Hannibal's face greeted him, and he blinked in surprise. "Hello, Will," he said warmly. "I can't say I'm not surprised to receive a call from you so soon, especially when you were so… shaken, last time we spoke."

Will's upper lip twitched. "I don't see why," he replied. "I'll figure out where you are. You'll slip up."

Hannibal smiled. "If you say so." His head tilted. "Do you have questions for me, Will?"

"Well…" Did he? Of course he did. He sat down on his bed, tugging at the tight collar of his uniform until it loosened. He pulled off his gloves and pressed his hands down on either side of him, frowning. Strange – he never considered his bed uncomfortable before, but now it felt so callous to him. "The resistance…"

Hannibal laughed. "You're not calling me to ask about the resistance," he said gently – scolding. Will flinched at it.

Will swallowed, and lifted his eyes. "When you went off the dose, surely you…. Surely it was hard. There must have been…doubts."

Hannibal's eyes flashed with intrigue. "Are you curious about my doubts, Will?"

"Just answer the question," Will snapped.

"No. Why do you ask?"

Will sighed, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. His head hurt, his spine felt too hard in his own body. Too rigid, suddenly, like he was made of metal instead of bone and scraping at himself from the inside out. "I need to understand," he admitted quietly. "I'm trying to understand why someone like you would do it."

Hannibal hummed. "It was hard," he finally said. "Prozium is like a drug, and every drug creates a withdrawal. You get through it by thinking about the people who put it in you." He paused again. "Are you old enough to remember what it was like before Prozium, Will?"

"I don't know," Will replied. He shook his head. He looked up. "You mean hate, don't you? Hate gets you through the withdrawal."

"Hate and anger are incensing emotions, Will. The true power is knowing where to focus it." Hannibal smiled. "But, yes. Hate got me through it, before. Now, it is not hate that drives me, but joy. Love. I want people to be able to feel what they feel without fear of execution."

"But the Prozium, and Father…" Will swallowed. "They're only trying to help. Human nature is so…"

"Uncooperative?" Hannibal finished for him, and smiled. "By all means, then – if someone colors outside the lines, medicate them. Right back into conformity. While we're at it, why not just institutionalize them, since we're only trying to *help*?"

A bitterness touched his voice, and Will blinked, and watched the way it turned his mouth down at the corners, put lines around his eyes. It did nothing to mar his face; he was still regal, sharp-boned. A finely-made predator watching the herd. Dangerous.

He smiled. "And if that doesn't work, I'm sure we can always find a witch or two to burn in Salem."

Will frowned. Despite his even tone, he could feel, stirring behind his ribs, an echo of Hannibal's own emotion. Empathy let him anticipate and expect, but this felt more like drowning. He swallowed again, and shifted his weight on his bed.

"May I ask you a personal question, Will?" Hannibal said, and Will lifted his shoulders in a shrug. Might as well. "Did you find your wife attractive?"

Will's brow creased. He conjured her face, unbidden – a soft, round face. Pale. Brown eyes and flaxen hair. Like wheat in sunlight. He remembered her smile, how wide it was. Her body, soft and giving under his hands.

"I don't know what you mean," he said after a moment. Attraction didn't play a part – they were a compatible genetic match, statistically likely to breed the best offspring. Tests told them when she was fertile, and they would move together on those nights. Kissing, only because his saliva had testosterone that would trigger her body to respond. Touching, because there was something to be said for erogenous stimulation. Will knew the taste of her better than anything.

But she did not make Will burn. Sweat and increased heartrate were side effects of sex. The Prozium gentled passion, made it clinical; a means to an end. Will made sure she had an orgasm because it seemed fair and because the contractions of female orgasms aided conception.

He swallowed, and thought about how his heart had raced when Hannibal touched him. How his mouth felt. He lifted his eyes. He thought about the sunrise and couldn't say he had ever felt anything close to that before. "I don't know," he admitted.

Hannibal smiled, though his eyes were sad. "Do you see?" he whispered, and Will abruptly thought of Hobbs, and that ache within his chest grew claws, and began to howl.

Will woke to the sunrise, and found that the puppy had managed to launch itself up onto his bed, and curled up behind his knees for warmth. He turned, and found himself smiling, sitting up as the dog yawned widely. He reached out, fingers curling, and smoothed his hand over its triangular, soft ears. Down to its thick scruff. It yipped at him, wriggling happily, and bared its stomach. Will pet it, marveling at the softness and warmth of the animal. He hadn't felt something like that for years, since his wife was taken away – just the presence of another living thing, warming his bed.

His eyes moved to the window, and he rose, feeling the cold glass beneath his fingertips. Such a contradiction – the air in his room was perfectly temperature-controlled for his body, but the glass was so cold. He dug his nails into the film, tearing it back so he could see the sunrise, and gasped.

It was *beautiful*. Light split the air, touching the tips of the towers that made up Libria. It danced and refracted in the rain, sending rainbows cascading through the sky. The light colored the sky a dusky pink, shining so brightly Will was blinded with it, and he pressed both hands against the glass, tearing more of the film away.

He stared, wide-eyed with wonder. The world looked so beautiful, so *alive*. His throat clogged, swept up with emotion, his heart racing, his eyes burning. A single tear welled, and fell, and he sobbed as he looked at the sunrise, for far longer than he should have. He was drowning, pulled under. He felt like he could die under the weight of so much feeling.

He growled, wretched with it, and flung himself away, rushing to the bathroom where he had left his Prozium gun. He put a fresh vial into the syringe and lifted it to his neck.

Froze, meeting his own eyes in the mirror. He was flushed, shaking. His eyes shone, brighter than he could ever remember seeing them. That sheen of emotion, of an offender, blinked back at him. His cheeks, red as the sky. His hair, colored in hues of brown dirt and something lighter; dried wood. He stared at himself. He stared.

After a moment, he lowered the gun. He took the vial out and, knowing now that there was a place to hide it, he wrenched the mirror from the wall and placed his vial on the little tray.

Just like Hobbs had done. He put the mirror back, and sighed at himself.

Perhaps, a rational part of his mind whispered, *emotion is the price to pay for tracking down Hannibal. For finding the resistance.*

Another part of him laughed. It had a new voice, and he didn't know if it was even his own. He didn't remember what his laugh sounded like. *You're a fool*, that part of him said. *You just want to feel alive*.

He ran a hand over his face, through his hair, and turned away from the mirror.

He didn't know what to do with the puppy. He couldn't keep it; there was no way to feed it without drawing attention from his extra rations. He hid the puppy in a bag and brought it to the Cleric car storage, putting it in the trunk of Francis' car, since that had been the one he'd used before, and was already contaminated with dog hair. He drove out of Libria and to a far part of the Outlands, and got out of the car.

He opened the trunk and placed the puppy on the ground. "Go," he said quietly. The puppy blinked at him, and whined, trotting forward and rubbing against his legs. Will huffed in frustration, and gave it a gentle nudge. "Go on. Get."

The puppy yawned at him, and Will huffed an aggravated breath. He picked it back up and placed it in the trunk, and drove back to the city.

"I'm told the offender from your raid the other day escaped." Mason's voice was tight, forcibly even.

"Yes, Sir," Will said, nodding once. "I believe he was trained in the Tetragrammaton style of fighting. He took out two officers and disappeared while I was investigating his stash of contraband."

Mason eyed him thoughtfully, and hummed. "And since then you have been searching for him?"

"Yes, Sir. I have a name, and his face. So does every officer in the enforcement agency. He won't remain hidden for long."

Mason nodded. He tapped his fingers against his mouth, looking Will up and down in that same cat-like way, as though debating if it would be cleaner to strike Will in the stomach, or at his neck. "Your partner tells me you looked rather shaken after the encounter."

Will blinked, and frowned. "I was…taken by surprise, Sir," he admitted. "I wasn't expecting him to be capable of killing. Most sense offenders aren't."

"Indeed." His head tilted. "Do you know of the Shao Lin, Will? Or perhaps the Mamelukes?"

"No, Sir, I don't."

"Before the purge, a long time ago, there was a land called Arabia. The Mamelukes were a caste of warrior monks. Eunuchs. They were selected and castrated at birth, and trained to be the greatest fighters the world has ever known." He tilted his head. "Existing entirely above the move and sway of passion. Like you, Will. Like me."

Will blinked at him.

Mason smiled. "You're surprised? All the high clergy, even Father himself, are drawn from the Cleric ranks, Will. We must all train as you did." He paused again. "What do you know of Father?"

"Only that he is the foremost citizen," Will replied. "A goal we should all strive to achieve. The very model of the insensate ideal."

"And have you ever seen him?"

"No, Sir," Will said. His jaw clenched, and he huffed. "Well, I don't know, Sir. He's nowhere, and everywhere. The threats of assassination force him to remain under close guard, but I know that every day he makes a pilgrimage to the Hall of Justice to watch over the executions."

Mason nodded. "And do you know why?"

"To test his lack of emotional response."

"Correct," Mason said, nodding, his voice low and pleased. "Because we can only trust such a person who will not be ruled by his passions, to continue to lead us. We may sleep well at night, knowing we do not have a leader that will resort to tyranny by the strength of his emotions."

His voice sounded like Father's; self-assured, completely calm and in control, knowing that he was in the right. Will nodded.

"And yet." Mason sighed. "There are bands of resistance who mean to tear down everything we have built. They want to bring us back to that very thing – the tyranny of emotion." He sat forward, and fixed Will with a steely gaze. "We can beat them, Cleric. But can we beat them without entering into league with them?"

He stood, and Will tensed. His brow creased, and he swallowed back the hard knot of uncertainty in his chest. "Sir?"

Mason circled his desk, approaching Will slowly. "I believe you can do it, Cleric Graham. But the only question is, will you? Will you be Father's weapon against the resistance?" He stood before Will, and tilted his chin up with his cold grip, giving Will a wide smile that showed too many teeth. Will swallowed, meeting his eyes. "Will you do this, Will? For Father. For me."

His voice had grown soft, coaxing, tugging at the loyalty that kept the great city of LIbria functioning. Will swallowed again, the hard knot of uncertainty coiling, hissing at Mason. It felt like it took everything in him to rasp; "It would be a great honor, Sir."

Mason smiled at him, and let him go. "Find the resistance and bring me the head of the snake," he commanded, turning away. Will breathed out harshly, and nodded, and left, knowing he was dismissed.

He drove back out to the building where the art had been found and burned, in the Outlands. The bodies had been cleared, the air thick with decontaminant. Dust settled in his mouth, coating his lips. He breathed it in, fingers shaking as he dug them into the pellet holes and pockmarks along the walls. He took off his glove, and dragged his nails across the wall, marveling at the feeling of cold as it swept up into his fingers.

He roamed the halls aimlessly, searching for…for something. He was restless, a wandering man with no direction in sight. He couldn't train alone; someone would bother him, someone he would have to continue to perform for. He couldn't hole himself up in his lodgings; someone would come looking for him.

He sighed, and went on, and stopped when a flicker of light dipped from a hole in the wall, hitting him on the cheek. He stopped, and turned, leaning in to peer through.

His eyes widened.

He found an abandoned battering ram and slammed it into the wall, the weakened plaster knocked down easily, revealing a staircase. There was a lamp above him, illuminating a large room like what he'd found at Hannibal's house.

Contraband, hundreds of pieces, greeted him. Glass glittered in the low light, and as he descended the stairs, his movements caused a gust of air to tickle some windchimes, filling the air with their music. He turned around, taking it all in, in awe at the myriad of colors that greeted him. The air smelled of incense, a smoky sweet scent, and he breathed it in raggedly.

He approached a table, picking up a large black disc. He tilted his head, and curiously set it on the record player next to the disc. His fingers twitched, and curled. With a slow intake of breath, he turned it on, and lowered the needle to the disc as it began to rotate.

He turned away from it when, after a moment, there was no sound. Probably damaged. He sighed, and took off his second glove, absently touching anything that struck his fancy. The bristles of a gold-handled hairbrush. The edges of a pile of smooth coins, cold and glinting faintly. After a moment, he took out Hannibal's tie and placed it on a table, sure that it would remain safe here, as long as no one reported the new find. And they wouldn't, if Will kept their gazes turned another way.

His eye was caught by a little glass ball, a statue of a tower inside it. He picked it up, feeling how fragile it was, and tipped it to see. Within the ball were flakes of white clusters of powder, and he frowned, tipping it further, until the statue was encased in a soft flurry of the powder, falling gently through the liquid inside it. Like dust, but softer. He watched the flakes fall.

Then, he heard it. A soft brush of strings filled the air. He looked to the record player. The strings joined together in a light, happy harmony, swinging up like a kicking heel, and were accompanied by a lower blare of strings.

Will gaped at the record player, his hands forming tight fists as he listened to the music. A soft horn started, and the strings grew louder, and then suddenly crescendo'd with enough force to strike him through the chest. It was a powerful anthem, and Will stepped back, the globe falling from his hands and smashing on the ground. But he didn't hear it.

A wave of something unnamable rose up in him, crushing his ribs, bruising his heart. He collapsed onto a seat behind him and put his head in his hands, shaking from the sound of the music, the gusts and flurries of it as it beat against his brain. His eyes welled with tears, for the music made him think of the sunrise – it was beautiful. It was evocative. It made Will want to rise and run, to touch and tear through the room. He wanted to taste everything, sample everything; he was a newborn in a big bright world and everything was too much. His senses were being torn open, leaving him raw and exposed.

The music kept playing, stinging the backs of his eyes, burning him down to his stomach. He gasped around his sobs, so wretched and powerful they were, and he slid helplessly to his knees, covering his mouth to try and stifle the sounds as the music pushed into him, and through him. He had been a ghost, and now he was solid flesh, and the world felt too real.

The music turned quieter, and Will lifted his head, his vision blurred. But he knew who it was. Hannibal was watching him, his expression unmoving, but not like Will's. He was not showing emotion, not because he couldn't feel it, but because he had better control over it than Will did.

"Hello, Will," he greeted softly.

Will tried to answer, but all that came out was a sob.

Hannibal sighed, and went to him. He had no fear. A hand touched Will's hair, gently worming through it, coaxing it from the slicked-back conformity Will forced it into every morning. Will's hair was naturally quite curly, and even with the wax to keep it in place, it sprung loose easily enough, and fell to shield the corners of his vision.

"Hannibal," Will breathed. "It's…"

"I know," Hannibal said, quiet with understanding. He pet through Will's hair gently, down to the nape of his neck, rubbing the tense muscles beneath his collar. Will opened it, allowed him more room, and sighed when the strong touch eased his headache somewhat. Hannibal sat down beside him as Will rose shakily back onto the chair, and pulled out a small bar of something from his pocket.

Will frowned at it, the bright-colored packaging. He took it, slowly unwrapping it to reveal what was inside. It was chocolate; the scent was sweet, the color a dark brown. He frowned at Hannibal, who gave him a warm smile in answer.

"A little decadent," he said, tucking Will's hair behind his ear, "but I think you'll like it."

Will swallowed, and broke off a piece, placing it on his tongue. He chewed, and swallowed, unable to describe the explosion of flavor that passed along his tongue. It was sweet, had a little crunch to it, melted easily in the heat of his mouth. He managed a weak smile, and Hannibal answered it in kind.

"I remember the first time I heard music, once I stopped the dose," Hannibal said gently. "It's quite overwhelming, isn't it?"

"It's beautiful," Will whispered.

Hannibal nodded. "I agree." He looked down, and gave Will another encouraging nod, and Will broke off a second piece of chocolate and ate it. He crinkled his fingers absently through the foil around it, the purple wrapping, admiring the hue and the little noises the wrapper made.

He pressed his lips together. "Is this where you've been hiding?" he wondered aloud.

Hannibal smiled. "I have many places to hide," he replied. His head tilted. "Are you going to arrest me?"

"I…" Will hesitated. Swallowed. Said; "I should."

"Mm. But will you?"

"I don't know."

Hannibal nodded. "At least you're honest," he said with another indulgent smile. His hand was still gently kneading at the back of Will's neck, and it felt good, easing the tension from his head and making the ache in it go away. Will wiped at his eyes, the tackiness of his tears itchy on his face, and looked at the sheen of them on his fingers.

For a moment, they both sat in silence. Listening.

"I've been tasked with finding the head of the resistance," Will said. He turned and met Hannibal's eyes. "But I think I've already found him."

Hannibal laughed. He had a nice laugh, just like Will remembered; low and warm. Enthralling. His eyes dropped to Hannibal's mouth, remembering the softness of his lips, the pressure of his teeth. The burn in his head flexed, melting, and dripped down his steel-like spine.

"You were a Cleric, weren't you?" he murmured. Hannibal's eyes met his, warming with pride. "That's how you knew how to fight."

"Yes," Hannibal said, nodding. "I was first-class for a number of years." He sighed, his eyes going to Will's hair again, absently brushing through it until it ruffled further. "It was the fifth year of life in Libria, when my sister was arrested and executed for sense offense. I felt nothing when she died, but knew I should have felt something, because I was old enough to remember it. So I stopped my dose, and the rage that overtook me, Will…"

He sighed again. "I cannot describe it. It was the strongest I had ever felt. I vowed, on that day, that I would devote every breath and every ounce of life within me to the destruction of Father. Of this 'great society' you so ruthlessly cling to."

Will swallowed. "I shot my partner," he said, and Hannibal's head tilted. "I'd worked with him for almost ten years. He was an offender. I found him reading a book of poetry. I shot him."

He hesitated.

"I *murdered* him."

The word felt so heavy, now. That was what he'd done. What he'd always done. He was a murderer, a killer, and he couldn't even blame emotion for it.

Hannibal hummed. "I knew him," he said quietly. "Hobbs. A good man. He told me a lot about you." Will swallowed; so that was how Hannibal knew his name, and knew who he was. "How is his daughter?"

"Alive," Will replied, because he knew that was what Hannibal was really asking. "Compliant."

Hannibal nodded, and sighed quietly, his hand leaving Will's hair. Will swallowed back a whimper of loss. "Well, Will, you have found the head of the resistance." He met Will's eyes. "Now what will you do?"

"I don't know," Will replied. "I can't -. I can't go back. Knowing what I know now, *feeling* what I've felt. I can't just -. I've tried." He shook his head, let out a bitter, helpless sound. "I don't like these feelings. The fear, the doubt. I don't know how to handle them."

"I can teach you," Hannibal said quietly. He held out his hand. Will looked down at it, and placed his palm against Hannibal's. Their fingers laced, and Will felt his heart beat double-time, his breath catch. He closed his eyes, his free hand forming a fist.

"I have a puppy," Will said. Hannibal let out a curious sound. "I took it because I couldn't bear the thought of killing it. But I have nowhere to put it. It's in the trunk of the car right now." He opened his eyes, and managed a weak smile. "Will you take care of it for me?"

"Yes," Hannibal replied, nodding.

Will smiled gratefully, and wondered at how easy smiling suddenly felt. "Thank you."

"It's my pleasure, Will," Hannibal said with a smile, and Will could tell he meant it. A simple act of kindness, for no other reason than to be kind. How novel. He lifted Will's hand and

kissed his knuckles, and Will sucked in another shaky breath, fingers curling.

The music died down, the song ended, and Will rose to turn it off lest it drawn attention. Hannibal stood with him, and together, they left the building and went to Will's car.

He handed the puppy over, and Hannibal smiled, tucking it under his arm. "Come back here tonight," he told Will, "and I will show you everything." Will nodded, and froze as Hannibal took him by the nape and kissed him again. It sent a shock of sensation down Will's spine, and he was breathless when Hannibal pulled away. "Be safe, Will. And be careful."

"I have heard a disturbing rumor, Cleric."

"A rumor, Sir?" Will asked. He was too aware of how many helmets were in the room, how many potential casualties there could be. One misstep, and so much death would happen as a result. He swallowed, and focused on Mason.

Mason's eyes were sharp, narrowed on him. He did not have the air of a curious cat anymore, but something bigger, with savage teeth, that had set its sights upon its prey, and was waiting to lunge. "I've heard talk that one of our own, a Cleric, has ceased his dose. That one of our elite members is feeling."

Will pressed his lips together. Drew in a slow breath, and managed; "Feeling, Sir?"

Mason rose, suddenly, slamming his hand on the table. "Are you *playing* with me, Cleric?" he yelled. Will blinked, shocked at the show of anger. It must be a powerful emotion, to overwhelm even the Prozium. Mason gentled, after a moment, and cleared his throat, straightening the sleeve of his robe. "This person, I'm told, has been attempting to make contact with the resistance."

His lips spread into a wide, vicious-looking smile. It was the smile of a predator that had caught the scent of blood. "Tell me, Cleric, how have you been spending your time?"

Will's lip twitched. "By attempting to make contact with the resistance," he replied evenly.

"*Attempting*," Mason snapped. "And how can you get anywhere by simply *attempting*?"

Will stared at him. Mason didn't know. He wasn't under suspicion.

He shook his head. "You're…absolutely right, Sir. I will redouble my efforts."

"You'd better," Mason hissed. "The resistance is the last line of defense, Cleric. If they succeed, we are all doomed. *Father* is doomed."

"I will find them, Sir. I will track down these traitors, and return them all to your fair justice."

Mason glowered at him, and dismissed him with a wave of his hand. Will turned, and hurried out of the building, his heart racing.

The building towered above him; another living unit. He had found a matchbook in the entrance of the building he'd met Hannibal in, tucked under the statue that had been in the snow globe, giving him this address. He breathed in, and swallowed, and went inside.

Immediately he entered a room with a dozen people, all of them clothed in bright, illegal outfits. Silks and dresses and wild hair, none of it uniform, none of it conformist. He swallowed, and found Hannibal in the crowd.

Hannibal smiled at him, and approached him, the puppy Will had given him at his heels. The puppy barked, and ran for Will, and Will smiled, kneeling down and cupping its face in gentle hands.

He rose, when Hannibal stopped in front of him. "You're truly feeling, now," he murmured.

"I could be faking it," Will replied.

Hannibal's brows rose, and he laughed. "I don't think so. You might be able to school your expression, keep your voice even, but my nose never lies." Will swallowed, thinking of how Hannibal had scented him the first time they met. His cheeks felt warm, his flesh coloring, and he lowered his gaze. "Come, Will."

He held out his hand, and Will took it, allowing Hannibal to lead him through the building. A cacophony of stimulation met him; music playing, people laughing, scents of cooking food coming from a campfire in a little room off to the side. He marveled at it all.

"Tread softly," Hannibal told him, and Will's heart ached. "I know it's difficult, Will. There are a million conflicting emotions, all fighting for the chance to be felt. You have your commitment to Libria, life-long obedience in one hand, and in the other, abhorrence for everything you have done in its name." He turned to Will. "Your mind now, newly broken, is plagued with feelings you have never felt before. It assaults your senses, offends your dreams." His head tilted. "Do you dream, yet, Will?"

Will shook his head.

"When you do, I hope it's pleasant," Hannibal said sadly. "Unfortunately the nature of feeling finds so much to hate when we see the world for what it truly is."

He led Will to another room, this one devoid of people. There were books along the shelves, bound in leather, and Will was sure every single one of them was illegal. So, too, the soft chairs set facing each other. Hannibal took one, Will took the other, sighing at the thick cushioning, the sturdy back. It was the kind of chair one could relax in.

Hannibal smiled at him. "I was a surgeon, before the purge," he told Will. "I worked in the Emergency Room. I saw so much chaos, there; anger and fear and sadness. Then, along came Prozium, and there were no more emergencies. Even people on the brink of death were content to wait their turn. Some died waiting."

Will frowned, and swallowed, looking away.

"And now?" he asked.

"Now I am a resistance fighter," Hannibal said, smiling. "And an eager ear. I like to listen to people, Will – I can help them understand what they're feeling. I can help them manage it."

"Prozium helps with that, too."

"No, it doesn't," Hannibal murmured, shaking his head. His tone was still gentle, indulgent; "Prozium robs you of feeling completely. It is like being put to sleep. What I do is more like…daydreaming." He sighed. "I will not deny that human nature lends itself to evil thoughts, Will. We are murderers, we are terrorists. There is an old poem, perhaps you've heard of it."

Will frowned.

"Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light," Hannibal said, and Will's fingers curled. "We owe it to ourselves to defend our future. Hate drives us, fear compels us to fight, but fear and hate can be tempered with joy. And the natural desire for company and friendship with other human beings."

Will frowned, and Hannibal waved in a man, who held a block connected to a wire, with an electrode attached. Will stiffened. "This is just a test, Will," Hannibal assured him. "I can smell emotion, but my compatriots cannot. This is to put their minds at ease."

Will pressed his lips together, and allowed the electrode to be pressed against his temple. Immediately, four lines began etching themselves across a sheet of paper. A lie detector, but for emotion. Hannibal smiled, and Will watched as he stood, and approached him.

He leaned down, cupping Will's face, and kissed him, and the etchings on the paper went wild.

Hannibal pulled back, leaving Will gasping and aching, and nodded to the man. The man nodded back, and took the electrode away, and left the room. Hannibal sat again.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Will demanded. Hannibal's head tilted, and Will wet his lips. They still felt warm. "Why do you keep kissing me?"

"Do you not enjoy it? I can stop."

Will's brow furrowed. "I…." He swallowed, and shook his head. No, he definitely enjoyed it. And he didn't want it to stop. The idea of Hannibal not kissing him was has hard to stomach as burning his tie. His fingers curled and he cleared his throat. "Kissing is only to be done within marital law," he said weakly. "A means to an end, to encourage the woman to -."

"Will." Hannibal's tone was soft, but firm. "I know exactly what the hormonal and physical response to affection is. But one of the benefits of feeling is being able to act on something you want to do outside of the laws and restrictions of your society." He tilted his head, and smiled. "Kissing feels good, doesn't it?"

Will swallowed. "Yes," he rasped.

"Then as long as you want to do it, you should be allowed to, as long as the other party wants to as well." Hannibal's voice had grown lighter with humor. "Surely it is a much better way to spend your time than hunting down and killing sense offenders."

Will flinched. He swallowed.

"I've heard kissing is an act of love," he said slowly.

Hannibal nodded. "And passion," he replied. "A feeling that grows, and takes root in you, and can only be satisfied by completely devouring the subject of that passion. It is why we eat, and paint, and compose music. We must manifest our emotions into the physical, in any way we can."

"That sounds like it could easily justify murder."

"Sometimes it does," Hannibal conceded. "Do you enjoy killing, Will?"

Will frowned. "I don't know."

"Killing must feel good to some people. We used to do it all the time. We still do, only now we are not allowed the pleasure of enjoying it."

"Did you enjoy killing those men, when I tried to arrest you?"

Hannibal's lips twitched. "Yes." Will blinked at him, eyes wide. "I enjoyed taking my bite, however small, from Father's plate. I enjoyed fighting God, back in the days before the purge. Telling Him, 'No, you cannot have this life, this one is mine', for each person I saved. Sometimes I had to submit to His will, but now I submit to none but my own."

"I don't know if I enjoy killing," Will breathed, "but there are a few people that I think it would…be justified for." He swallowed. "Righteous."

Hannibal smiled widely. "Is one of the men on your list Father?"

"Yes."

"Who else?"

"Vice-Council Verger."

Hannibal nodded, eyes flashing with a brilliant, proud light. "Our goals are the same, Will," he said, sitting forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "If we could infiltrate the council, and do away with dear Mason, and Father, there are bombs placed beneath the Prozium

dispensaries and the alarm systems." Will's eyes widened. "One day, Will. It would only take a single day of interrupted Prozium flow for people to start feeling again. To remember what it was like to be free. To be alive."

Will shook his head. "I can't kill Father," he argued. "Now that I understand what life is, you want me to start taking it? I can't do that."

"Don't you see, Will? You are the *only* person who can," Hannibal insisted. "You are the only person who understands our cause, and has the means to see it through."

Will shook his head again.

"Will," Hannibal said, and reached for him, taking his hand. The touch of his warm skin against Will's was like a lightning strike. "Your partner was trying to do the same, but he failed. Because of your hand. You can finish what he started. You can make his death mean something."

Will drew in a breath, and hissed it out. "I see you, now," he snarled, snatching his hand away and standing. "You're just like Father, like Mason – we're all just pawns to you. You think your way of seeing the world is the right one, but so does Father, and I have to tell you, Hannibal, *his* way seems a lot more damn peaceful than yours. His way keeps people alive."

"But they're not *living*, Will," Hannibal replied, standing as well. Will glared at him, taking a step back towards the door. Hannibal grabbed his wrist, and Will pushed it away, jabbing for his shoulder. Caught, again, because of course Hannibal knew how to fight. He took Will by the neck and slammed him against a stack of books and Will snarled at him, until Hannibal's hand went tight.

Animal fear, the fear of death, struck him for the first time, and Will went limp, breathing hard. Hannibal was close enough to smell, to taste his exhale. He swallowed, and Hannibal released him immediately, thumbing over the red mark he left behind in apology. Regret colored his iris, turning the outer edge of them a dark brown.

He sighed through his nose. "I cannot, of course, force you to do something you don't want to do," he said quietly. His other hand touched Will's cheek, gentle as a breeze, and brushed his hair back from his face. "My entire enterprise hinges on free will, and to rob you of your choice is something I will never try to do."

Will swallowed again, remaining still.

"But I cannot in good conscience let you leave, now that you know where we are."

"Hannibal?"

Their heads turned at the sound of Hannibal's name. A young girl stood at the doorway, her eyes wide with shock. There was a book of poetry in her hand. Yeats. Will blinked, gasping in recognition.

"Abigail?" he whispered.

She looked at him, her face turning pale with fear. "I…"

Will shoved Hannibal away, and approached her. Her eyes darted over his shoulder, and Will felt Hannibal hovering like a shadow at his back, but he must have given her a reassuring signal, for she didn't flee.

Will stopped in front of her. "How long?" he whispered.

She swallowed. "Since they took my mom away."

That was years ago. Before Hobbs became his partner. Will couldn't believe it – she had been under the heel of the society for so long, living in fear, with a Cleric as her own father. He thought of all the things Hobbs had taken, claiming to log, and his eyes fell to the book in her hands again. It had the bullet hole from Will's shot, and Will wondered who, exactly, gave it to her. Maybe there was an offender on his team. Maybe one in the contraband hall itself. So many people, living in fear.

Tread softly.

When Hobbs went off his dose, maybe then she would have felt safe. Until Will made her an orphan.

Guilt. It reared up like a beast of war and caught him in its teeth.

He turned to Hannibal, and met his dark eyes. "I'll do it," he said, and his voice didn't waver. His heart had gone quiet.

Until Hannibal smiled at him, and it began to race again.

"I've located the center of the underground, Sir."

"Good." Mason smiled at him. His fingers drummed on the edge of his desk, uncharacteristically jittery. Will wondered if, perhaps, with all this stress, Father's voice would need to up his dose soon, too. "And when is the raid scheduled to deal with them once and for all?"

Will swallowed, pressing his lips together. "Tonight."

"Excellent. If this proves fruitful, Cleric, you may choose your own reward."

Will's heart beat powerfully in his chest, but he kept his voice impassive. Control. He needed to remain in control. "My reward, Sir, would be knowing I had freed Father from the terrible necessity of all this security."

Mason smiled, his eyes flashing with something dangerously close to feverish, bloodthirsty glee.

They raided the resistance location. Will watched Hannibal and Abigail be taken away, and watched as Hannibal glared at him, fighting against his cuffs.

"Keep an eye on him," Will commanded the helmets. "He's a slippery one."

"Damn you!" Abigail screeched.

Will heard a yelp, and watched the puppy be grabbed by its scruff and thrown in a crate. He swallowed, a pang of regret in his chest, and hoped that it would take long enough to process the thing that it would still be alive when all was said and done.

The van doors locked, and drove away, and Will turned to see Francis eyeing him strangely. "Shall we?" he asked, and Francis nodded, getting into the car with him as they drove back to Libria.

Francis hummed, and rubbed at his jaw. "You ever wonder what happens when we've burned it all, Cleric?" he asked. Will frowned, and looked at him, and Francis grinned in reply. "Who will we watch, when it's all gone to ash?"

Will had no answer.

He drove to the council building and only made it a step out the car before Francis lunged at him, knocking him to the ground. Will rolled onto his back, dazed but ready to fight, and kicked at Francis, but the man was bigger, and had the high ground. He kicked Will savagely in the ribs, winding him, and kicked him again so he flew onto his belly. A foot pressed to his back and Francis aimed a gun at his head.

"That fucking puppy," he snarled. Then, louder; "This man, this *Cleric!*" He brought the butt of his gun down hard on Will's temple, sending his head snapping to one side. "Has ceased his dose! He is a sense offender!"

The milling civilians stopped, looking at Will with dull, impassive eyes. Suddenly, the man in the arena made much more sense to him. They were all sheep, staring at him blankly, like they had no idea what was going on. They didn't care.

"He is the worm eating at the core of our great society! And *I* have brought him here to receive your justice."

He snarled at them, and then Francis was hauling him to his feet, mouth at his ear; "I told you, Will; I'd make my career with you."

Will snapped his teeth together, grunting as Francis kicked at the back of his knee, making him stumble forward. He cuffed Will and a garrison of helmets flanked Francis as he was hauled inside, and into Mason's office, thrown to his knees in front of the man.

"Vice-Council," Francis said, breathing hard, his gun still aimed at Will's head. "This man is guilty of cavorting with the resistance, breaking bread with sense offenders." He kicked at Will's back again, sending him sprawling forward, and Will hissed and wiped blood from his temple with the heel of his hand. "Even of sense crime itself."

Mason blinked at them, and nodded to one of the helmets. "Dispatch a search team to the Cleric's living quarters, see if you can locate any unused Prozium," he said. Will bared his teeth, blooding staining them from coughing it out of his bruised lungs.

"That won't be necessary, Sir," Francis said. "I've taken the liberty already – he had a puppy in his possession, confiscated from a raid. Said it was for testing, but we found it with the resistance people when we arrested them today. I also drew up his phone records; there are a number of unregistered phone calls made between him, and the source signal places it at the headquarters we raided."

Mason blinked again, brows lifting, impressed. He opened the screen at his desk and his fingers tapped over the keyboard, before he let out a soft puff of admiration. He raised his eyes from the screen, and looked to Will.

"Cleric, I assume you have something to say for yourself?" he asked.

Will spit out a wad of blood, shakily pushing himself to his feet. "Sir, I know it's hard to believe…that a Cleric, one of our esteemed order, could turn his back on everything he'd been taught." He sucked in a breath, mindful of his bruised lungs, and shook his head. "To become a sense offender, to associate with the resistance, but it's true."

In his periphery, he saw Francis grinning at his confession. His lips twitched, fighting back a smile of his own, and he lifted to his knees, straightening up. Then, to one knee. Then to his feet.

"I promised I would bring that man to you," he said evenly, and looked to Francis. "And I have."

Francis was still grinning at Mason, and then he looked to Will. His smile fell, and he did a double take.

"Cleric Dolarhyde," Mason said softly, "the phone records show it was *your* lodgings that received the phone calls. And I have a sweeper report here, commissioned by Cleric Graham last night, that puts dog hair in *your* vehicle."

Because Will did not take his car, when he tried to move the puppy. He was smarter than that. He forced himself not to laugh, seeing Francis' eyes widen with horror, with understanding.

"But…" Francis shook his head. "That's impossible! He must have planted it!"

"Will's house is spotless, Cleric," Mason said impassively. That was what happened when someone accidentally spilled their rations and had to have a cleaning crew remove the mess. "I have the morning sweeper report you commissioned right here."

Will smiled.

Mason sighed, heavy and hollow with performative regret. "I suppose I should have known by your enthusiasm, Francis. The rabid passion with which you undertook this task. A fervor

reminiscent almost…of a man feeling," he finished, his eyes narrowing. Francis froze, his eyes wide. "Take him to the Hall of Justice and have him executed immediately."

"No!" Francis said, as three helmets came forward and cuffed him, hauling him back. "It's him! It's Graham! He's *feeling*!"

Mason and Will watched him go, and the doors closed. Will schooled his expression, and turned back to Mason as a helmet came forward to unlock his cuffs.

"Of course," Mason said mildly, "since a formal complaint has been lodged against you, I will be required to sweep your vehicle and premises, in accordance with the law." His head tilted, lips twitching into a sharp smile. "Do you think that's necessary, Cleric? Or am I being too unyielding?"

Will hesitated, but only for a moment.

"As you say, Sir," he replied. "It is the law."

Mason smiled. "And it doesn't disturb you in the least that Dolarhyde is going to his end?"

"Should it?" Will asked, arching a brow.

Mason grinned at him, and shook his head. Right answer, as always.

Will swallowed, and straightened up, schooling his expression again. "It only disturbs me, Sir, that I am Father's instrument, yet I have never had the honor of meeting him."

Mason frowned, his head tilting curiously. He hummed. "Cleric, you must know Father never allows an audience -."

"Even to the man who brought him the resistance?" Will interrupted, smiling. "The man who brought him the traitorous leech in our midst? I will, of course, submit to Father's ruling, but I ask him to consider, Vice-Council, if he would see fit to grant me the honor."

Mason eyed him, and then he nodded. "I will ask him to consider it. Once we are sure we have the head of the snake. You can expect to hear from me shortly."

Will bowed his head, and left the building.

Chapter 3

He wanted to go see Hannibal, and Abigail. He ached, with a desperation that felt right at home in his chest, to know if they were okay. He didn't know if Father would bid them be immediately destroyed, content that they were the entirety of the resistance. No interrogation, no trial. Nothing but fire and blood.

His hands burned, and his dreams, when they came, were restless. He tossed and turned, shivering and coated in sweat, at the thought of Hannibal burning before his very eyes. Thought, desperately, of how the man might look at him in his final moments. If he would smile, seeing Will's tears.

He woke, and tried to sleep again. Another surge of dreams plagued him, these ones worse, and somehow better. He dreamed of gutting a man, tearing him open at the belly, the red splash of blood hot on his hands. He dreamed of Hannibal's kiss, burning him from the inside out. Set to devour, teeth and tongues mapping every slope of his body. He was assaulted by phantom memories of warmth, a body beneath his own. He wondered if he ever laid with his wife when she stopped taking her dose – wondered if her gasps and moans were incoherent and helpless cries of pleasure, or if they were performative, because Will's dull and sheep-like instincts responded better when she made noise.

He was lost, a tiny ship on a savage ocean, buffeted and drowning, and surged upright with a frantic cry, feeling hands at his neck and teeth in his shoulder. He searched blindly in the darkness for the creature of night that was assaulting him, but found nothing, and he ached, and ached.

When morning came, it was with a message from Verger. Father had granted him his audience.

"Do not address Father unless first addressed by him," a helmet told him, divesting Will of his pistols and ceremonial sword. The Cleric's ceremonial robes were white, instead of black, reminiscent of old warrior garb from before the purge. "Do not look at him directly in the eye. If you should break his six-foot zone of personal safety, you will be immediately executed by snipers. Do you understand?"

Will nodded, hardly hearing the words over the rush of his thoughts, the frantic pounding of his heart. He was led into a grey room, where Father was projected on a wide screen, his voice muted, though Will had heard his Doctrine often enough to know he was saying more of the same. *Congratulations, Libria, for you are free and alive!*

"Now, there's just the test," the man told him, bidding him sit. Will frowned.

"Test?" he repeated.

"Yes," the man said, nodding. "You didn't think we'd risk exposing Father to even such a dedicated servant such as yourself without taking a test first, did you?"

Will blinked, swallowing harshly, as a block much like the one Hannibal had used on him was brought forward and placed beside him. Electrodes were pushed against his temples, and Will took a deep breath, watching the flickers of the etchings go back and forth. Far too much for a man who was meant to feel nothing. He should have taken Prozium before coming here, but now that he knew what feeling was, how could he possibly have turned his back on it?

An interrogator approached him with a clipboard, a serene smile on his face. Will tried to control his breathing, but his eyes were on the paper as it scribbled away. Too emotional, he was too emotional. He needed to calm down.

Deep breaths, a voice whispered to him, that sounded a lot like Hannibal. *Harness your emotions. Control them. Focus.*

"We'll start with a test question first," the man said, and Will swallowed harshly. "More of a riddle, actually. What is the easiest way to get a weapon from a Tetragrammaton Cleric?"

Will's heart wasn't slowing. His pulse remained fast, his thoughts whirring. He stiffened, as he felt a presence at his shoulder, and turned to see none other than Dolarhyde leaning down, smiling wide enough to show all of his teeth.

"You ask him for it," Francis said, his eyes shining with triumphant, vindictive glee.

Abruptly, the screen flickered, and Will's wide eyes took in the faces of the other council members. Three men, three women, all of them smiling at him. "Did you really think we'd be so stupid," they asked in unison, "to not know that you were *feeling,* Will?"

The faces flickered, merging together, to form Father's face.

"Did you forget?" he asked, and Will watched, wide-eyed with disbelief, as Father's face dissolved, revealing Mason's. Mason smiled, widely. "That I'm everywhere?" Around him, the helmeted men raised their weapons in unison, focusing on him.

The emotion detector at Will's side went wild, sharp valleys and rises of emotion betraying him. Anger, confusion, rage. He clenched his fists and glared at Mason's smiling face. "Dolarhyde's task was simple. He had to make you think you'd won. I should thank you, Will," he said brightly. "You have consolidated my power, and given me the resistance."

The screen flickered again, widening from Mason's face to reveal Hannibal at his side. Whole, alive, with a bruise on his temple and ligature marks around his neck. The etching lines on the emotion detector were now so strong that they were scraping off the sheet of paper entirely.

"And everyone in it. Only someone who was truly feeling could have done it. Bravo." Will snarled, watching as Hannibal pressed his lips together, glaring at Mason. Mason wrapped a hand in his hair, jerking his head back, and Will tensed. All the guns on him clicked from safety to automatic. "And now, Will, I have you too. Quietly. Without any unfortunate or upsetting incident."

Incident. Will's lips twitched in a snarl, thinking of Hobbs. Yes, entirely without incident.

He met Hannibal's eyes, and bowed his head. It was all for nothing. All of it, gone, a flicker of shadows suspended on dust. His fists clenched, waves of emotion rising higher and higher in him. Rage, such rage. Righteous anger. Hate – oh, the *hate*, blinding him to all else. He heard Mason laughing, and Francis with him, and felt like his stomach might explode with it.

It all built, and built, cresting over him and threatening to devour him whole. He was drowning. He was going to sink, into the abyss.

The abyss smiled at him, and took him in its jaws, and swallowed him.

Focus.

"No," Will said, and his lips twitched into a smile. He lifted his head, opened his eyes, and found a place to focus that hate. Rage, rage, against the dying of the light. "Not without incident."

The lines on the detector, suddenly, went still. A complete flatline. No emotion. No fear.

The interrogator's eyes widened. "Oh, *fuck* -."

Before anyone could react, for Will was the best, the fastest, the elite, he reached behind him and stripped Dolarhyde's gun from its holster, rose, and shot the interrogator between the eyes. He rose like a phoenix, a cold heart of determination stymying his fear, obliterating his senseless anger. He had a place to put it now. He knew what he had to do.

It was all statistics. Helmets were no different. He shot another one before the man could react, and rushed for him, ducking below the bullets aimed for his head, and relieved the corpse of its weapon. He stood in the center as they rushed for him. Sixteen degrees, and another sixteen. He moved to one side so that one helmet was gunned down by another, took the man's gun from him and threw away the empty pistol, two automatics in his hands now as he gunned down the rest of them.

Francis was gone, but Will knew where he went.

He turned a glare on the screen, and snarled; "I'm coming." He shot it out, and then went in the only direction he could – forward.

There was a hall, circling in a slow rise, lined with helmeted guards. Will shot the first two before they could react, stole their pistols and threw them in front of him, scattering to a halt at the other end of the hallway. Alerted by the sound of gunshots, the other guards were ready, but they were no match for Will.

The guns were a part of him; they were a means to an end. He smiled, easily clearing the hallway, almost amazed at how easy it was. This was what he was made for; a machine, precisely tuned in the art of murder and fueled by a righteous anger that Prozium would have never allowed him to feel.

He slid down between the last two guards, shooting up just as the magazines emptied, and retrieved the pistols he'd thrown down. He held them easily, their weight pulling him to the

ground, though he felt lighter than air, and pushed through the grand double doors at the end of the hallway.

A room greeted him, opulent in a way he didn't expect to see. There was art on the walls, and pillars made of marble. He blinked up at the fine crystal chandelier hanging above his head, and frowned, lowering his eyes to Mason.

"It appears I'm not the only one capable of feeling," he said coldly. Mason stood behind his desk, Francis at his side, and Will strode forward. Hannibal was nowhere in sight. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"You seemed quite taken with him," Mason mused. He shrugged. "I was curious."

Francis came forward, a sword in his hand like Will had surrendered. He was a Cleric, too, and should not be underestimated. Will snarled, and aimed at his head, only for the pistol to be knocked aside by the sword. With an expert twist, Francis lunged for him, the blade skating along the edge of his neck – but too far away to damage him. A thin spurt of blood stained Will's white robes, but the pain did nothing to stall him.

He hissed, and dropped one of his pistols, catching Francis at the wrist and hauling him forward. He smiled, looking into Francis' wide, terrified eyes. Aimed his remaining pistol under the man's chin, and shot.

Francis fell with a loud thump, and Will spat the blood from his mouth.

Mason had moved forward in his distraction, a gun in his hand, and Will snapped his own up to match him, perfectly synced. Statistics. Mason listed one way, Will mirrored him, and they circled each other. Mason smirked. "You forget, Will, I was trained in the Tetragrammaton too. I know your thoughts, even as you do."

Will answered him with a sharp smile of his own, his voice barely more than a snarl; "Then you know I'm going to kill you."

Mason's smirk widened. "That, I'm not so sure about."

He fired, and Will fired at the same time, their bullets colliding and exploding in a maze of shrapnel. Will fired again, and shoved Mason's gun to one side, but Mason mirrored him. All statistics – one degree to the left, no, blocked. Countered. Will's ears rang from the proximity of so many shots, but Mason had one more bullet than he did, and Will would run out first.

He let Mason get in one extra shot, and then he shoved him back, and Mason snarled, and aimed to match Will's shot. But Will did not shoot. The bullet ripped through his shoulder, sending him staggering back. The pain was excruciating, and his hand hung limp. He switched the gun to his other hand.

He had one bullet left, and he aimed it at Mason's forehead with a steady grip.

"Wait!" Mason cried, holding his hands up in surrender. Will breathed out, panting, sweating from the pain, from exertion. "Wait. Look at me!"

Will did. Mason reached for him, pawing at the hem of his white robe; a supplicant on his knees in front of an unforgiving god.

"I'm life," Mason said. "I live, I breathe. I – I *feel*, Will." He sank to his knees; begging for mercy, his fists clenched tight. Will was capable of mercy, now. "Now that you know it, can you really take it?"

For he was right. Those other men, they had not been alive. Mason was alive. Mason felt things, just like Will did.

He swallowed, and lowered his gun. Breathed out. "A heavy price," he murmured, and Mason's shoulders dropped in relief. But, no – Mason was not life. Mason was not alive. Will raised his pistol again and placed the burning muzzle to Mason's forehead. "I pay it gladly."

A single shot. Father was dead.

Will let the gun drop from his hand, wincing and grabbing beneath the wound in his shoulder. In one last moment of coordination and resolve, he went to Mason's desk, and pushed every button on the keypad, staining it with his blood. He fell to his knees, breathing hard, and lifted his head as a side door unlocked and opened. Hannibal was there, and rushed towards him, falling to his knees in front of Will.

"Will," he said, voice tight with worry, his face twisted into an expression of concern as he gently touched Will's shoulder. Will hissed, and flinched from him, delirious from pain. And yet, he smiled. Yet, he laughed, a laugh that shook his entire body. The abyss spat him back out, and he could see the sun.

"Is it done?" he whispered.

"Almost," Hannibal replied. He helped Will to his feet, slinging his good arm over his shoulder. "Your part is done, Will. It's time to rest."

Will woke to a weak-limbed warmth, his shoulder throbbing, but not in quite so much pain. He groaned, rolling onto his side, to find he was in a comfortable, large bed, laden thickly with pillows and soft blankets. He breathed in, a smoke-whiskey scent that clogged his throat and made his lungs feel heavy.

At his side, the puppy lifted its head, and whined at him.

He smiled, and reached out to pet its sleek forehead. "Hey, buddy," he whispered. The dog licked at his hand, and Will pushed himself upright, frowning when he found he was in a space much like his living quarters, though that was impossible, for there would never be such lavish, illegal things in his space.

The door opened, revealing Hannibal, holding a tray of steaming soup, a glass of water, and, Will noted with a laugh when it was set down beside him, a bar of chocolate.

"It's good to see you up," Hannibal told him warmly.

"How long was I out?" Will asked.

"A few days," Hannibal replied. "I put you in a medically induced coma to limit the trauma to your shoulder. How does it feel?"

"It aches," Will said.

Hannibal nodded. "That's to be expected."

Will sighed, and took the glass of water, sipping at it. "The bombs?"

"All detonated as planned," Hannibal told him, smiling. "The Prozium dispensaries are out of commission. It is finished – the dose is dead, the Cleric's back broken, and Father is nowhere to be found."

Will hummed, righteous anger tempered by sweet victory.

"And the council?"

"Mason killed them all, years ago. I suspected, and feel quite vindicated to know I was right. He was the only head of the snake, Will, and you cut it off." Hannibal's head tilted, eyes soft with amusement. "Not cleanly, but I cannot fault you for that."

"You were too busy being locked up to help," Will said with a hum, making Hannibal's eyes shine with amusement. He sighed. "No revolution was done without bloodshed."

"No," Hannibal murmured. "I suppose it wasn't."

"What happens now?"

"Now we simply wait, and let human nature take its course," Hannibal said, smiling. "My home was not burned, despite your orders. Resources are tight, I've heard." Will huffed. "I intend to move back there, and decorate it how I see fit."

His gaze moved away, to the dog, and he pressed his lips together. He reached out, petting the animal's head. "There's room for you there, if you want it," he said softly. Reluctant – no, not that. Will frowned at him. Nervous.

"I should hope so," he said, and Hannibal's eyes snapped to him, softening when he smiled. "You're not allowed to just turn my entire world on its head and not even offer me a place to sleep afterwards."

"Of course," Hannibal laughed. "Forgive me. I assumed you might want…space, after."

"I'm done with being alone," Will told him, and Hannibal nodded, understanding. Of course he would understand. "You, me, the dog." Will paused. "Is Abigail alright? And the others?"

"Unharmed, and free, yes," Hannibal confirmed with another nod. "I imagine she'll need a place to sleep, too." His mouth twisted into a knowing while when Will rolled his eyes. "All that utilitarian grey isn't good for a girl as spirited as her."

Will nodded in agreement. He set his water glass down, and turned to Hannibal. Took his chin in hand, and pulled Hannibal in for a kiss. Hannibal responded eagerly enough, after a moment of shock, and Will closed his eyes, savoring the way their lips shaped themselves against each other. The pressure of his teeth, the soft slip of his tongue.

He pulled back, humming to himself. Hannibal's eyes were bright. "Why did you do that?"

"I thought it would be fair to initiate, for a change," Will replied, smiling. Hannibal laughed, and moved to settle beside him on the bed, his arm pressed tight to Will's good shoulder. Will turned to him, resting his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder, marveling at the sound of his heartbeat; steady, but quick. Hannibal's arm lifted, and his hand settled in Will's hair, petting it back from the wild tangle it had taken during his rest.

"Hannibal," Will murmured, and received a hum in answer. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course, Will."

"Are you attracted to me?"

Hannibal laughed, though he was careful not to move too much and irritate Will's wounded shoulder. Will closed his eyes, feeling the warm pressure of Hannibal's lips against the top of his head.

"Very," Hannibal whispered, and breathed him in. Deep, ragged, the sound made Will's stomach tense up, heat in his chest rumbling curiously and nudging at the base of his throat. "I regret that you were injured, though I realize now that it was only through acting unpredictably that you were able to best Mason."

"Statistics and Prozium go hand in hand," Will replied. "Without one, I was open to the idea of discarding the other."

Hannibal hummed. "And that was Mason's downfall," he said. "Believing that you were incapable of change. I'd like to think I had a hand in it, myself." His head tilted, and he planted another kiss to Will's hair. "Why did you stop taking your dose, Will?"

"It was an accident," Will replied honestly. "I took an extra dose the night I killed Hobbs, then dropped the morning one. Never made it to the dispensary." He laughed. "That kind of was your fault, I guess. If we're trying to find reason in the chaos."

"Mm."

"I don't regret it," Will said, and lifted his head so he could meet Hannibal's eyes. "None of it. Of all the emotions I've felt, regret has never been one of them, for what I've done since I met you."

"Regret and guilt can be healing emotions," Hannibal told him, nodding once. "But only when they are justified." He smiled, and cupped Will's face in a gentle hand. "I'd like to rid you of them entirely, if I'm able. Bad emotions can be soothed by good ones, when all's said and done."

Will nodded, turning his head to kiss the meat of Hannibal's thumb. He sighed, and shifted his weight, wincing when his shoulder throbbed tenderly. "I think I'll be able to move," he said. "We don't need to stay here."

"Nonsense, there is no hurry," Hannibal replied calmly, his smile warm. "Now eat your breakfast," he commanded, and Will huffed, rolling his eyes. The film in the room had been torn away, cleared entirely, and Will put his eyes on the sunrise as he ate, Hannibal's warmth and strength beside him and keeping him upright, as he filled his belly with delicious food, and feasted his eyes on the beautiful sky.

They moved, once Will was well enough, his stitches taken out and his shoulder no longer at risk of fracturing entirely without pressure around it. Hannibal was a doctor, after all, and Will trusted his treatment, even if the physical therapy was rather unpleasant.

They moved into Hannibal's old house, and filled it with his horde of illegal materials. A raid had been conducted on the contraband halls and the Hall of Justice; prisoners freed, contraband stolen and placed amongst the populace. It was impossible to cross a street and not hear music, or laughter, or shrieks of childish joy.

Will did his part, with the anti-resistance. Those that refused to stop taking their dose, or continued to hunt down offenders, were rounded up and held in prison until the drug went out of their system. Most of them came around, by the end. Those that didn't, well.

It was a heavy price, but Will paid it gladly. He was the only one who could.

And the world spun on, as it always had, and always would.

Will returned home one day to find Abigail laughing, wrestling with the puppy in their front room. "Careful with that," he scolded, gesturing to one of Hannibal's fine carpets. "If Winston scuffs it up he won't be happy."

She grinned at him, and he smiled, moving on. The scents of roasting meat tugged him to the kitchen, where he found Hannibal dressed in a white button-down and black slacks, tenderizing a steak by hand. He came up behind him and kissed him on the shoulder.

Hannibal's head turned, his eyes bright, and he smiled at Will. "There you are," he murmured, and turned for a kiss. Will met him eagerly, a hand threading through Hannibal's hair. The knot of heat in his stomach he was beginning to equate with desire rumbled impatiently in him, but he was quick to move away, lest it grow claws. He hadn't touched Hannibal like that,

or let Hannibal touch him, even after they started sharing a bed. First, it was out of concession to Will's injured shoulder, and then it was just Will himself.

Emotions were still so new to him. He wasn't used to how they made him feel, how much *Hannibal* made him feel. He knew his desire was not unanswered, that Hannibal would be more than happy to touch and taste Will however he pleased, but sex had always been for the sake of procreation, dull and clinical, and Will couldn't even imagine how it would be off Prozium. It made him nervous to think about.

"Dinner's almost ready," Hannibal told him. "Twenty minutes."

Will nodded, running a hand through his hair, and went upstairs to their shared room. He smiled, still not quite used to the sight of so much color, and art. Hannibal was an artist, and liked to sketch, and more often than not the subject of his drawings were Will, Abigail, or a combination of them with the dog. Will didn't know how to cope with seeing so much emotion on his own face.

The picture of the woman with the swan was in their dining room. Will claimed he liked it too much to put it anywhere else. Abigail had simply stared at him, muttered something under her breath about weird fetishes, and Hannibal had laughed and hung it up for him.

The bedspread was thick, colored in teal patterns, and Will sat down on it, his hand grazing the fabric. The pillows were fluffy and white, soft under his touch. So much comfort, and warmth. Even without optimized temperature control and a scientifically designed mattress meant to accommodate his body perfectly, he slept better in this bed than he ever had, even on Prozium.

His fingers curled, and he swallowed, and looked up as Hannibal's shadow darkened the doorway. He eyed Will with a small crease to his brow, and stepped in, shutting the door behind him. "Are you alright, darling?"

Darling. Hannibal had taken to calling him that. It made Will flush, and feel warm. "Yeah," he rasped, and wet his lips. His eyes slanted to the little miniature sitting area at the foot of the bed that mimicked Hannibal's office when he was with the resistance. Looked, to the Chess board set up, ready to play. He liked playing Chess with Hannibal – it was strategy, but emotional too. Defense and offense, depending on the player's mood.

Will usually played defensively, and often ended up losing. But he was learning, and getting better.

Hannibal's gaze followed his, and then he sighed, and came forward, sitting beside Will on the bed. He nudged their heads together, and Will smiled down at his lap. "Are you sure?" he murmured.

Will swallowed harshly. "No," he replied. Hannibal knew emotions were still new to him; he was patient, and understanding. He allowed Will his anger, showed him ways to focus and control it. He talked Will through his nightmares, and his dreams. He encouraged Will's joy and happiness.

Hannibal hummed. "If you don't want to talk about it, I won't make you," he said quietly. "But it upsets me to think there's something you're suffering from that might be improved by talking, and yet you force yourself to suffer by refusing to."

Will huffed. Hannibal was also a pretty damn manipulative bastard, too. Will didn't like him feeling hurt, and he knew it. He turned his head, their noses brushing, and sighed. "Is it bad that I miss it, sometimes?" he asked.

Hannibal lifted his head, his face betraying nothing. "Miss it?" he echoed.

"The Prozium," Will said. "The…nothingness. No guilt, no anxiety, no worry. Sometimes I miss not feeling that."

"Are you worried about something?" Hannibal asked.

Will blinked, slowly, and turned his face away. "Yes," he admitted. "I feel…. I feel like there's this heat in me, this impatient and aggressive thing. The kind of thing that made Prozium necessary in the first place." He breathed out, fingers clenching in the bedspread. "I don't know how to control it, how to let it out safely. I feel it festering, bubbling up, ready to burst."

Hannibal regarded him, and lifted his hand, petting through Will's hair and over the nape of his neck. They quickly learned it soothed Will, to be touched like that, and Will sighed, letting his shoulders drop to give Hannibal more room.

"It is in the nature of men to want to conquer and control," Hannibal told him evenly. Will blinked, frowning down at his feet. "I told you before, what seems like a lifetime ago; it is why we create art, and build, and travel to seek out new lands."

Will's breath caught, his eyes closing.

"I'm not an artist," he said.

Hannibal huffed a small laugh. "Are you an architect, then?" Will shook his head. "A traveler?"

"I don't know," Will replied. "I'm -. I feel restless. I want to *do* something. I -. People kept asking me what would happen when it was all gone, when we'd burned all the contraband and arrested all the resistance, and I never knew the answer. And now it's all been destroyed and I don't know what to do."

He sighed, and leaned forward, elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. "So I guess I just…miss it. That's all. I miss having a purpose, a direction. I'm just floating along doing nothing and I wish I could forget about how much that bothers me."

Hannibal hummed, his thumb brushing idly up and down Will's neck. "Well," he said slowly, "at the risk of being told I've been unhelpful, that is one of the great mysteries and delights of life, Will. You get to decide your purpose."

Will huffed.

"Right now, I would argue that, yes, you are shipwrecked on a new island. A stranger in a strange land." Will looked up at him, frowning. "So do you not owe it yourself, to sample all the experiences of this new land? To find what makes you happy to do, and people with whom you are happy to live?"

"I am happy," Will said. Hesitated. "I think I am."

Hannibal smiled, and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I'd like to think you are, too," he replied. He stood, and held out his hand. "Come. We'll eat dinner, and then Abigail has told me she's meeting some of her friends and intends to stay out quite late. We will have some time to test the waters and see if there is something we can do to entertain you."

Will pressed his lips together, and nodded, allowing Hannibal to pull him to his feet.

Dinner was delicious, as always. Will had never tasted anything as good as Hannibal's cooking, and while he knew Hannibal appreciated the compliments, he was running out of new things to say, and felt like he was repeating himself. Always repeating himself – Hannibal always smiled at him and thanked him, but the repetition gnawed at Will's skull and aggravated his tongue.

He sighed, as Hannibal brought him a glass of whiskey – more contraband, one of the first things to get passed out to the general populace – and settled with him in the study. The study was lavishly decorated, Hannibal's books lining the walls, the fireplace aglow and fire popping and crackling happily away within it, painting the room in soft oranges and browns that reminded Will of the sunrise, and of Hannibal.

He sipped at the drink, feeling the burn of it. He got drunk quickly, having never had alcohol before the revolution, and had learned to take it slow.

Hannibal's warmth was a pleasant counterbalance to the heat of the fire, and Will turned and smiled at him, already feeling himself start to loosen as the whiskey burned through him. Fire suited Hannibal – it made him look softer, and younger, gentling the smile lines around his eyes and mouth, filing the sharp edge of his cheekbones. His eyes were black, his teeth showing, as he smiled back at Will.

He reached out and flattened a hand on Will's knee. Just resting there, no intention beyond the desire for touch. Will had quickly learned Hannibal was a tactile man; he liked to nuzzle Will's hair, graze his knuckles along Will's back or shoulder, leaned into him often when they were sitting together, and was demanding as ever when it came to cuddling in bed. Will liked it, though – the absence of touch was something he grew to hate towards the end, and he never felt more settled than when Hannibal was rubbing his neck or his shoulder, or petting through his hair.

But too soon, Will knew, it would change. It would grow claws, heated intent. Hannibal was an emotive man, when all was said and done, and spoke volumes with his eyes. Will was

always aware of when there were eyes on him, from his training and then his plotting and now, with Hannibal, he knew the gaze of a predator when he saw one.

The worst part of it was Will was a predator, too. He watched Hannibal and saw something similar to him. It wasn't empathy, wasn't just absorbing and assimilation; it was genuine, mirror-image, equals and opposites. Will *felt*, and he knew, now, how a man could look at another man and feel hungry. He knew exactly what Hannibal was thinking when they'd first met, and Hannibal had thrown him up against a wall and put a hand around Will's neck.

It would be worse, if Will let it happen now. He had no Prozium to dull his senses, no safeguard against his own emotions. He would drown, and for the first time in his life, he was terrified of drowning.

Hannibal tilted his head, and Will mimicked him. "I can practically hear your brain buzzing, darling," Hannibal said quietly, and smiled when Will huffed and took another drink. The smoke of the whiskey filled his mouth and made him feel heavy.

He sighed. "Does it get easier?" he asked. "Feeling?"

Hannibal tilted his head, and nodded once, after a while. "To a degree," he replied. "It is like a sudden change of weather – we learn to accommodate the cold front, and soon grow comfortable in it. Just as we may shed our clothes for summer heat, and pack more on during the winter. The occasional spike may take us by surprise, but as time goes on, you will get used to it."

"I don't know," Will murmured. "I suppose you would know better than me, but right now that seems impossible."

"The dichotomous nature of man," Hannibal replied kindly. "To fear the unknown, and yet be terribly curious about it."

"I am curious," Will admitted. "I've always been curious. It's one of the things Prozium could never push out of me. That and restlessness. I used to train, when I felt like this. I found it meditative, almost." Hannibal hummed. Then, after a moment, he stood, and took Will's glass away. Will looked up at him as he held out a hand.

"Then let's train," he said, and smiled. "I'm a little out of practice, myself."

Will blinked at him, and took his hand, smiling as he was pulled to his feet. Hannibal led him upstairs, to one of the empty guest rooms in his house, that held no furniture and no boxes. It had been repainted, one of the walls a deep, evocative red, but other than that it was like being back in his living quarters. Back in the training grounds.

"You will need to go slowly, for your shoulder," Hannibal told him. He let Will go, and stepped a pace away, into a ready stance. "I'll try to go easy on you."

"Don't you dare," Will replied, a strange bubble of giddy anticipation rising up in him. Yes, fighting was good. He knew how to fight – he was good at it. Hannibal was too; just like their Chess games, this was something they were on relatively equal ground for.

He took up his stance, and Hannibal smiled at him, a mirroring, anticipatory darkness coloring his irises. He struck first, and Will evaded him, easily melting into second position – knees bent, hands held out to either side of him, low and ready to sweep. Hannibal mirrored him, another step forward, striking for Will's head, and Will ducked and aimed a blow at his side, a savage dig of his knuckles into Hannibal's ribs. Hannibal breathed out harshly, a slight tightening in his shoulders in reaction to the pain, but then he stepped away, dodging the next blow with ease.

It got faster, then, as Will overcame the ache in his shoulder and convinced it to move as seamlessly as he ever had. Hannibal punched at his sternum, knuckles knocking the bone, winding him, and Will countered with a sweeping kick, sending him stumbling back. Hannibal huffed a laugh, wiping a hand over his mouth, and Will lunged for him, parrying his answering blow and punching again, hard enough that Hannibal went back again, his shoulders colliding with the red wall.

It was a dance Will knew intimately, and he was delighted to find that Hannibal seemed to be enjoying himself as well, as they exchanged blows and counterattacks like they had been doing this all their lives. Will was a little slower with his right arm, straining when his shoulder ached, but he was capable enough. Both of them, elite, monsters fighting for the sheer pleasure of it.

Hannibal lunged for him again, chopping sharply down at Will's neck, and Will managed to evade the worst of it but it still sent him stumbling, breathing hard, his hair coated with sweat and making it stick to his neck. He whirled around and struck out hard, catching Hannibal at the hip, and followed it with a swift uppercut aimed beneath his ribs.

Hannibal caught his wrist, and wrenched it behind his back hard enough that Will lifted to his toes. He slammed Will back, his shoulders hitting the wall, and Will gasped, staring up at him. It was his good arm, so it didn't hurt quite so badly, but his other shoulder was too sore to get the precision and speed he would need to free himself of it.

Hannibal was panting, his eyes shining brightly, and Will lifted a hand and fisted it in Hannibal's hair. His heart was racing, his stomach on fire, and he leaned in and kissed Hannibal deeply. It was passion, fervor, *hunger*. Hannibal's grip loosened and, with a smile, Will twisted his hand free and pushed him back.

Hannibal gasped, eyes black now, and he gave Will a wide, proud smile, as Will lunged for him again, aiming for his shoulder. The blow hit, knuckles hitting thick muscle, and Hannibal grabbed him by the hair, twisting and shoving him away. Will grinned.

"You're not fighting like a Cleric," Hannibal said, his voice low, barely more than a growl.

"Is that a problem?" Will replied, brow arching.

Hannibal laughed, glowing with delight, and shook his head. They collided again, grabbing at clothing, anything to get a superior handhold. Hannibal's hands pulled Will's shirt free, and he used the loose material to haul Will close. Their foreheads butted together – gently, but hard enough Will blinked, dazed.

Their eyes met, and Will wet his lips, earning Hannibal's gaze. His eyes, already so dark, blackened further, the flush on his cheeks reddening. He looked beautiful, like that; Will could stare at him like this forever.

He cupped Hannibal's face with a shaking hand, and pulled him in for another kiss. Hannibal met him eagerly, his hands flattening high on Will's back, mindful of his injured shoulder. Will smiled, and hooked a heel around the back of Hannibal's knee, shoving him to the ground, and prowled over him as Hannibal gazed up, breathless, taken by surprise. Will quite liked that look on him, too.

He straddled Hannibal's hips to keep him down, pressed his hands on the other man's wrists and pinned them down by his head. The best position to stop him being bucked off, if Hannibal couldn't convince his shoulders to twist the right way, couldn't lift his hips with enough leverage to displace Will.

He made no such effort, merely lied there, prone and defeated, and smiled up at Will.

"I should commend Mason's legacy for introducing unpredictability to your fighting style," he said warmly.

Will huffed. "Don't talk about Mason," he replied, and leaned down for another kiss. The frantic restlessness was shifting in him, from his head, lower now. He needed something else, he *wanted* something else. Something that gnawed at his spine and made his heart hammer in his chest. Hannibal's kiss soothed him like a hand in his neck, but also twisted something in him. Testosterone; fight or flight.

Or, option number three.

Adrenaline, surging through Will's veins, warming his hands. He released Hannibal's wrists and cupped his face instead, kissing him hungrily as Hannibal went lax beneath him, hands settling on Will's hips to keep him steady. Hannibal let out a pleased, rough noise into his mouth that Will eagerly swallowed down.

Will parted from the kiss with a gasp, closing his eyes as he felt, deep in his stomach, a hard coil of insistent, impatient heat. He felt his body responding, soaking up Hannibal's warmth, adding to his own. It plagued him, pushed right into him like music, like sweet food. He rested his forehead on Hannibal's chest and heard his heart pounding.

Hannibal's hands tightened on his hips, and he subtly urged Will into a slow, juddering grind, and Will moaned weakly, feeling Hannibal's erection between his thighs. Felt his own – it was desire. He felt it and knew that was what it was. His own cock was hard, too, and the friction of Hannibal's stomach against it felt wonderful.

He whined, helplessly, and Hannibal cupped his nape and kissed his hair. "You're allowed to feel it, Will," he said quietly. "Do what feels good."

"This feels good," Will rasped, choking as his mouth flooded with saliva. He was hungry. He wanted to taste, to bite, to lick the sweat from Hannibal's neck. He lifted his head, nose

dragging up Hannibal's collarbone, to his bared throat, and he pressed close and breathed deep. Beneath him, Hannibal shivered.

The salt on Hannibal's skin made him growl, bracing himself on his good arm by Hannibal's head, the other flattening over Hannibal's ribs, feeling how they heaved and pushed against his skin through his shirt. He huffed, tugging at it, hiking it up, until he could feel Hannibal bare, warm and strong beneath his touch. Even when they held each other in bed, they kept their clothes on, because Will was too touch-starved, too easily overstimulated, to weather it for long.

But this felt good. This felt *wonderful.* His spine had turned to steel again, but instead of tearing at him, it moved as though molten, his back arching and hips grinding in surer, slow movements that made Hannibal's cock rut between his legs, and Will's own shoved uncoordinated and hard against Hannibal's now-bare stomach through Will's clothes.

He breathed out, the sound shaky, and licked at Hannibal's neck, felt him shiver and rumble in pleasure, and smiled. Pleasure – a soft, insistent pulse of it licked at the back of his skull, behind his eyes. He felt it whenever Hannibal smiled at him. He tasted it whenever he was well-fed, grew warm with it when Hannibal was at his back.

It was not just synapses and dull sensation, now – it was urgent, spurned by the knowledge that it would end, eventually. Death, or just the endless ticking of the clock, reminded Will to feel alive. To relish in that feeling.

He kissed Hannibal deeply and clawed at his shirt, ripping the halves apart until his chest was bared, and flattened his hands on the smatter of thick, curling hair. Coarser than that on Hannibal's head, but warm and softened by his sweat. He dragged his fingers through it, marveling how hair could at once be so soft and so thick, noting the fact that it was more grey than that on Hannibal's head.

He leaned down, rearing back, knees slipping along the floor as he settled on Hannibal's thighs, so he could bow his head and rub his cheek against the hair, sighing gently. He nosed at Hannibal's sternum, curious and smiling as Hannibal growled in answer, stomach sinking in and going tense. A hand went to his hair and Will tilted his head into it, sighing at the gentle tug, the soft scratching along his scalp. It was pleasant, and sent warm affection through him, sitting at the back of his throat.

He wondered if this was what being drugged felt like – not with Prozium, but with some other chemical that made him sensitive to sights and smells. He pushed his forehead against Hannibal's collarbone, fingers dragging down his flanks, just wanting to feel him. He was so warm, and smooth; powerful and strong. A sleek-coated predator, a machine softened at the heart, just like Will.

They were the same, despite the odds. Not conformed to a single ideal, but matching perfectly in the chaos of the new world. Will trembled with that knowledge.

"Hannibal," he rasped, and lifted his eyes. "Did you ever have a spouse?"

Hannibal blinked at him, and shook his head. "No," he replied. "I was never assigned one, and then when I began the resistance, I put aside desires for companionship beyond fleeting nights." He sighed. "I knew it was too dangerous, that my emotions could get the better of me, if I became too attached."

Will frowned. "But…you're attached to me."

"Yes," Hannibal admitted. "Quite without my permission." Will hummed, and his lashes went low as Hannibal pet his hair from his face and gently brushed the back of his neck. "But I don't regret it."

Will's brow creased. "I've never been with anyone except my spouse," he said, settling on Hannibal's thighs. Hannibal nodded in understanding. "And never without Prozium. I don't know how I'm going to react."

Hannibal's brows lifted.

"I mean, I *know*," Will said, flushing, his mouth stretching into a sheepish smile. "I know what happens. But I'm already so…" He blushed deeper, and gestured to himself; to his hard cock and hammering heart, as though Hannibal could see both equally well. Some ridiculous part of him thought that maybe he could.

After a moment, Hannibal nodded, and sat up, cradling Will in his arms as Will shifted back and settled more comfortably on his lap. Hannibal's hand slid back into his hair, holding him still as he kissed Will, and Will sighed into it, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, allowing Hannibal to use his other hand to pull him closer, until their chests were touching.

Will almost expected Hannibal to say something else; to reassure him, to try and talk him through it, because that was what he'd always done. So it took him by surprise, and he stiffened, when Hannibal's teeth set into his lower lip, holding him still as Will shivered and arched against him, and his hand left Will's hair, instead sinking between their bodies, and pushed insistently at Will's erection.

Will gasped, but resisted the urge to jerk back in case he drew blood in the process. Hannibal's teeth were sharp. Hannibal let out a pleased sound, and gripped Will tightly, rolling him onto his back and settling between his legs. His hand didn't let up for a second, as he kissed Will until Will's lungs burned, his heart hammering, his stomach felt like there were claws in it, digging deep furrows that felt red-hot.

He arched up, wincing as his shoulders dug into the hardwood floor, but the pain felt good too, in a different way. Pain let him focus; he was no longer being pulled out to sea. No longer drowning. He was alive and solid and real, and so was Hannibal, towering above him like a monument.

He reared up and kissed Hannibal, trembling when Hannibal answered him in kind, cupping his nape and squeezing tight as he tilted his hand, rubbing his palm tight against Will's cock. The warmth of him was muted through Will's clothes, but still Will moaned for it, collapsing onto the floor as Hannibal followed him, crushing him against it, and Will could only cling to

him and grind up helplessly as Hannibal kissed him and touched him and made the hard knot of desire, of passion, flare inside him.

"*Hannibal*," he whispered, his voice hoarse like he'd been shouting. Their eyes met, Hannibal's hair fallen across his forehead, his gaze black, cheeks red and lips parted. He looked so *good* like that, and made Will hunger for more of it.

Hannibal leaned down, lips parting wide over Will's pulse. His teeth skated along his sweaty skin and Will hissed, arching up, heels scraping against the floor as he sought more friction. Hannibal's fingers deftly unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans – Will had taken to wearing them, now, and soft t-shirts because he liked feeling the sun on his arms – and his hand slid beneath them, and his underwear, wrapping around his hard cock.

He gasped, tensing up all over, at the feeling of Hannibal's strong hand gripping him, stroking slow and tight. He shuddered under the onslaught, desire, arousal, biting at the back of his neck, and then Hannibal's hand was there, giving physical sensation to it, and Will grit his teeth and bit down hard on Hannibal's shoulder, hands raking up his back, as his orgasm overtook him. He cried out loudly, overwhelmed, and Hannibal smiled and kissed his rabbiting pulse as he touched Will through it, forcing the pleasure to linger, to dig deep into his belly, to rip him apart from the inside.

His hands flew down, shoving Hannibal's away and reaching for his clothes instead. He needed it; he needed to feel where Hannibal was hard and heavy instead of soft and wet like a woman. He tore at the button and zip of Hannibal's suit pants and wrapped a hand around his cock, groaning weakly at the feeling of smooth flesh. Hannibal was leaking at the head, his cock a deep, dark red, like the red on the wall.

Hannibal growled, clenching his fist by Will's head, back arching up as he exposed his belly for Will's hands. Will dragged his fingers up his chest, stroked him as tightly as he dared, using the leaking precum to ease the way. He reared up and kissed Hannibal, swallowing his low, animal noises, answering them in kind. They were the same; two members of the same species that had found each other on the brink of extinction.

Hannibal's hand covered his, eased the tightness, encouraging Will to stroke a little slower, more forceful at the base, and then the head. A slight twist of his wrist at the head made Hannibal's jaw go slack, and he kissed Will wantonly, a tremor running down his spine as Will kept touching him.

It was messy, and the scent of his own release stung Will's nose, clogged his throat. He couldn't imagine how it smelled to Hannibal, with his sensitive nose. But Hannibal seemed rabid for it, free hand gripping Will's hip tightly to keep him still as he took over the rhythm, driving his erection against Will's wet, softening cock and the mess on his stomach. His hand was slick, nails digging in to keep his grip on Will. His upper lip twitched back, showing his teeth.

"Do you need more?" Will asked. He could blame his own sensitivity for finishing so fast, and so easily. On Prozium he had needed a lot more stimulation; having sex with his wife often took a long time simply to get there.

Hannibal shook his head. "No," he snapped, like he was angry. Not angry though; seized by passion. Lust, shining in his black eyes, making his arms tremble. "No, Will, this is perfect."

Will smiled, breathless. "Next time," he promised, and Hannibal's eyes flashed, met his. "Next time I'll take you like a wife." And he didn't know which way he meant that, but he found he didn't particularly care. He wanted to try both – he wanted to know what it felt like to have Hannibal inside him. Wanted to take Hannibal in turn. Equals and opposites.

Hannibal's breath left him in a heavy explosion of air, and he leaned down and gripped Will's hair, kissing him fiercely as he drove his cock through Will's fist, and went still, coming with a loud, sated snarl over Will's belly and his hand. Will released him after a moment, content to let Hannibal rut against him as he rode out his orgasm, kissing him with bruising teeth and searching tongue. It felt good, amazing, having Hannibal on top of him like this. Like losing a battle but winning the war.

Hannibal's kiss gentled in increments as he tried to catch his breath, lips grazing Will's mouth, his jaw, his burning cheek. He sat up, after a moment, and Will curiously dragged his fingers through the mess on his stomach, and lifted it to his lips to taste.

It wasn't particularly unpleasant; salty, and bitter, but definitely not as good as Hannibal's cooking. Hannibal laughed, when his mouth twisted down, and leaned in for another kiss, helping Will to sit up as well to save his sore shoulder.

Will swallowed harshly, running his clean hand through his hair. He cleared his throat. "I know this is probably a stupid question," he said, and Hannibal eyed him curiously. "But you don't…plan on doing that with anyone else, do you?"

Hannibal smiled, and shook his head. "No, Will, that was not my intention," he replied. His head tilted again. "I told you before; kissing and sex are acts of passion. It feels good, doesn't it?" Will nodded, mute; yes, it felt very good. Better than food or a deep sleep. He felt alight with it. "Father's law would have you believe it's only to be done in a martial bed, for the sake of procreation, but I would rather do it with someone whose company I enjoy, and who enjoys mine equally."

"But you enjoy a lot of people's company," Will said weakly. "You have…friends."

Hannibal hummed in consideration, and nodded. "That's true," he conceded. Will let out a soft, unhappy sound, and Hannibal's lips twitched in a smile. "Are you feeling possessive, darling?"

Was that what this was? This bristling, defensive thing in his chest, that snarled at the idea of touching anyone else like that, of having *Hannibal* touch anyone else like that. It felt the same as when he'd considered giving up Hannibal's tie, before all this. He swallowed, and lifted his good shoulder in a shrug.

Hannibal took his chin in hand, forcing their eyes to meet. "I have no intention of warming anyone else's bed, Will," he said evenly. Calmly – assured. "And I hope you have the same lack of intention. I'm rather possessive, myself."

Will huffed, but couldn't help smile. "I know I shouldn't joke about stuff like that, but I think I'd kill you if you did this with anyone else." He thought, suddenly, of the man in the arena. The man who killed his wife for sleeping with someone else. Jealous. Possessive. It made a lot more sense to him, now, with Hannibal.

"I don't think you're joking," Hannibal said warmly, his smile wide, eyes brightening with affection. He brought Will to him, nuzzling his hair, and kissed his forehead. "There are varying levels of attachment, Will. There's acquaintances, and then friendship. Family, both blood-related, and forged, like ours is. And then there is what I feel for you."

Will swallowed, and lifted his gaze. He dared not put a name to it, but he didn't think he had to.

Hannibal smiled, soft with understanding, and kissed Will again. "Let's go clean up," he suggested, correcting his clothes, and standing. Will nodded, and refastened his jeans, grimacing at the sticky, drying smear of come on his stomach. Hannibal's eyes were bright with humor when he reached down and helped Will to his feet.

They kissed again, and Will let Hannibal lead him to the shower. Will felt settled, his mind much more at ease, knowing that whatever happened, he would not face it alone. He was so tired of being alone.

The sunset colored them softly, and outside, it began to rain. A cleansing rain, to wash away the stain of Libria, and Father's shadow upon it.

And the world spun on, as it always had, and always would.

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